鋼殻のレギオス
CHROME SHELLED REGIOS
23 ライク・ア・ストーム
雨木シュウスケ
SYUSUKE AMAGI
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鋼殻のレギオス23
ライク・ア・ストーム

グレンダン王家の武芸者クラリーベル・ロンスマイアことクララが心から欲するもの、それはレイフォンとの決闘。繰り返される（クララからの一方的な）挑戦の果て、クララがレイフォンに抱く想いは次第にかわっていき――。

「これを使って、レイフォンに最後の戦いを挑みます！」

決意表明をする彼女の手に握られている小瓶、そこに満たされた謎の液体の効能と、クララの新たなる野望とは!?

天剣授受者レベルの力と技を持つ“嵐を呼ぶ少女”クララを中心に、レイフォン、フェリ、ニーナら、学園都市の人々を巻き込んだバトルと恋（？）の暴風が吹き荒れる！

「闇が深いほど
紅は美しい」
鋼殻のレギオス
CHROME SHELLED REGIOS
23 ライク・ア・ストーム

ハイアの指揮による連係戦――
天剣授受者の個々の力が
絶え間なくヴァティを襲う
「負けるもんですか！」

あなたの光で呪いを祓って――
いや、そんな力ないし

Storm Bringer

The bell sounded.

It was the signal announcing the start of the competition.

Only a week since the start of the new year, the new Student Council President had announced the holding of this competition.

It was an individual sports competition amongst the new Military Arts students.

Last year, Zuellni had fallen in danger of losing its last Selenium mine and had also encountered various other hardships - one could call it a disastrous year. But it had obtained two victories in the Military Arts Competitions held between Academy Cities and had successfully increased its number of Selenium mines.

There was no Military Arts Competition this year.

However, if they slacked off this year and failed in the Military Arts Competition again next year, all of that would become meaningless. This competition was being held in order to maintain the sense of urgency as well as to convey this sense of urgency to the new students.

"Hmm, how do you use this?"

Claribel stood on the battlefield, muttering as she tested the feel of the battle clothing and the practice sword that she wasn't used to.

Both of those were unfamiliar equipment, so she felt a bit off. After completing her basic training, Claribel had practiced under the guidance of her first teacher - who was also her grandfather - true Military Arts always without any safety equipment. Though her next teacher had been Troyatte, having reduced Kei flow was the most severe handicap out there when battling with primarily Karen Kei, so safety equipment had been completely meaningless.

In that sense, Claribel hadn't held any weapon other than the Kochouenshiken since she had gotten used to it.

"Haah~ it really doesn't feel right."

Claribel swung the practice sword several times as she muttered this. However, there wasn't any practice weapon with a similar exterior to the Kochouenshiken, so there was no helping it.

Other first-year Military Artists had already scattered to various locations on the battlefield. Forest and mountain terrain had been set up just like during the normally-held platoon matches, and the terrain became more complex the closer it was to the center, a great place to ambush enemies. The Military Artists who had looked at the overview map beforehand realized this, so they had gone to the central area before the starting bell sounded.

Only Claribel alone had gone near the entrance.

The competition rules were very simple. The one who defeated the most people and who was still standing on the battlefield after the allotted time was the winner. Teaming up or moving independently was all up to the individual to decide.

Claribel hadn't come across anyone near the entrance, nor had she even found a place to fight. To her, she was already in a disadvantageous situation.

The bell sounded.

The signal of the competition's start.

"Ah, I guess this is still a bit unfavorable."

After murmuring this, Claribel moved. The word 'defeat' wasn't in her mind at all.

She leisurely walked to the center of the battlefield. The sound of battle already came from around her. The crashing sounds of Kei, sounds of impact, dust explosions mixed with the shadows of people. The spectators moved between cries and cheers, their shouts filling the sky of the battlefield.

There certainly were several Military Artists who were confused by this noise. Had they never fought in a competition before in their hometown, or had they just never been in a competition of this nature? To Claribel, the current atmosphere was no different from the countless competitions she had entered in Grendan. She ignored the Military Artists shaken up by the competition atmosphere and advanced towards the intense fighting.

Of course, there were people who were jolted back to their senses by her demeanor, and who turned to attack her. Claribel counterattacked suitably while increasing her KOs.

"Huhu♪ Ah, that's about right."

Claribel hummed as she swung her practice sword, seeming quite happy.

Two people watched this scene from the spectator seats.

"Uwah, how amazing."

"Yeah."

Nina nodded after Harley gasped in admiration.

"Just like Layfon and Gorneo-senpai, people from Grendan are really strong."

"......Yeah."

Even if she wasn't as good as Layfon, Claribel definitely was one of the best of Grendan's Military Artists. Though Nina had been in Grendan, she had pretty much never seen any of its Military Artists fight, other than Heaven's Blade successors. Maybe Felli or Sharnid, who had crossed swords with Grendan Military Artists, would be more knowledgeable about this.

However, neither of the two were here. Felli had shown a disinterested expression like always, and even Sharnid had said: 'that girl will win anyway' and publicly expressed that he wouldn't be going to watch the competition.

Cheers rose again, with the voice of the female emcee especially excited.

Was this pretty much as expected? The cheers were for Claribel.

She had arrived at the center of the battlefield, which had already become an intense battleground. There were several temporary teams and hastily-formed alliances locked in battle with one another, reducing each other's numbers. Nina believed that, when teaming up with strangers, quickly understanding what you and your new teammates could do was more important than trusting each other.

However, it was something very difficult to do, and even now Nina didn't fully grasp what she could do. She could fully realize that fact when she considered the many things that had happened despite the amount of time their platoon had accumulated training their teamwork.

Though the teams were temporary, attempting to act cooperatively was praiseworthy. Of course, whether she wanted to recruit any of them into her platoon was another matter.

"Ah, isn't it Shin-senpai over there?"

"......Yeah."

Before founding the seventeenth platoon, Nina had belonged to the fourteenth platoon, and Shin was the current captain of the fourteenth platoon. He was watching Claribel with an extremely serious expression, with no trace of his normally-lighthearted air.

"He's incredibly into it."

"It's because the fourteenth platoon lacks members."

Shin was her senpai and former commander. Nina sent him a respectful glance.

Harley had only noticed him, but Nina had already spotted the other platoon captains who had come out here and there. All of them were observing the strengths of the new students, and planned on recruiting the ones who interested them into their platoons.

Claribel was the only one among these new students who never left their gazes. Maybe it was the unfamiliar weapon in her hands, but she seemed a bit awkward to Nina's eyes. However, she actually was enjoying that disadvantaged feeling.

Claribel possessed incredible strength, and definitely reminded the spectators of Layfon from one year ago.

"......An incredible recruiting battle's going to start up."

"......Yeah."

After Harley said this, Nina nodded absent-mindedly.

A recruiting battle? Of course such a thing would happen.

"But she came here chasing after Layfon, right? In that case, won't she come to us?"

Harley hastily added, possibly worried about Nina's distracted demeanor.

As befitting her attitude, Nina only nodded, but to tell the truth she wasn't thinking about that matter at all.

Nina was just watching Claribel's movements. She was standing in the center of the intense battleground alone, indifferently parrying the focused attacks that various groups directed towards her and striking them down one by one. The flashier she became, the hotter the looks the platoon leaders flashed at each other became. Nina felt the hot gazes, but felt as if that scene was happening somewhere far away.

The sun kept shining. Now it was the afternoon.

The scene changed to a restaurant.

Of course, this was a celebration for Claribel.

"It was all so sudden."

After a toast, Claribel spoke with a sight.

When she had returned to the changing room after the competition, various platoon captains had been waiting to meet her. There were various kinds of people among them, some who were veteran captains, and some who were juniors who had taken over when their seniors graduated and given them the position. Hence among them were people that Nina had heard of but never actually seen. As could be expected, almost all of them were here to recruit Claribel.

"Though I heard about it already, everyone was surprisingly desperate."

"It's because the scholarship they get varies depending on the performance of their platoon."

Harley replied with that and then started explaining that part.

"......I see, that might not be bad for motivating training and competition."

"Is that how it goes?"

"That's right. But never mind that, what happened with the data I gave you before? Can you reproduce it?"

"Of course it's possible. Also, I brought it today. Even I can't fine-tune it without the person in question present."

"You work so fast."

"It’s because I've never made such a weird thing before, so making it was very interesting."

"A weird thing....."

"Ah, that's a compliment, of course."

The moment the topic switched to Dites, Harley's interest perked up. The Dites of the first-year new students weren't strong enough, but Claribel seemed to plan on

fixing her Dite right here and now. After spotting that, Nina reminded her with a gentle tone.

Just then, Nina felt a sharp gaze, so she looked around.

The shop was almost full of customers. Was that to be expected? The other platoon members hadn't come, so there were only three people at the four-person table Nina and the other sat at.

Though Nina turned her head, there were people gazing openly and rudely at their table..... and there were several.

"....."

Faces she recognized and unfamiliar faces, all looking at Nina with grim expressions.

Speaking of faces she recognized, there was Vance of the third platoon. In addition, there were several new faces that looked like brand-new captains.

Faces of those who hadn't given up on recruiting Claribel.

"Ah~ they’re still here."

Perhaps her talk with Harley had come to an end. Claribel muttered this, looking in the same direction as Nina.

"Those people are so annoying. But if what you said before is true, they won't give up so easily, right?"

"Money isn't the only reason they want rookies."

Claribel's tone made Nina inadvertently voice a rebuttal.

"Especially people like Vance-senpai, who have a very strong sense of justice and duty. They definitely believe that, in order to keep from repeating last year's mistakes, they shouldn't let talented Military Artists laze around with nothing to do."

Of course, among them were also Military Artists with their sights set on scholarships. Nina wouldn't deny that those kinds of Military Artists existed, and she also knew that there were allies connected by things other than trust, so she wasn't sure exactly what the other new captains were thinking.

"But you're taking Military Arts at Zuellni, and you're so strong, so I think there will constantly be people looking for you to join their platoon."

"I see."

Harley's words made Claribel raise her head to look at the ceiling, as if in thought.

"If joining a platoon means I can gain battle experience, joining one would be okay."

"In that case....."

"Hmm~ but....."

"Hey, Nina Antalk."

She turned around and saw that Vance had already come up to them.

"What is it?"

"I have something to talk to you about."

"Oh."

After being singled out, Nina stood up from her seat.

Vance went to the entrance of the restaurant and stopped around the sofas that people waiting in line used.

"Senpai, what is it?"

"It's about her."

Vance cut straight to the chase.

"Yeah."

"Do you plan on having her join the seventeenth platoon?"

"Well, it depends on what she wants."

"What? That's a very laid-back answer, considering your personality. But why is that?"

"Our rooms are very close, and we've met a few times, so we're friends."

"Oh? In that case, can I believe you won't force her into joining the seventeenth platoon?"

"Senpai? Do you want a verbal guarantee?'

"Uh, that's pretty much right."

"Being honest isn't necessarily a virtue."

"You're become pretty eloquent."

"Don't be like that, I've been here for four years."

"It looks like your experience as a captain wasn't wasted."

"......Our results last year weren't too different from yours, senpai."

"Well, who's responsible for obtaining that kind of fighting strength but only managing those kinds of results?"

"Ugh....."

The platoon had Layfon, Felli, Sharnid, and Dalshena. They were all talented people who would definitely become core fighting strength no matter what platoon they were put in. Naruki was a first-year student, so she was still a growing talent, but her rate of growth also showed promise. They still had a

weakness in their number of platoon members, so should she absorb Claribel into the platoon right here and now?"

"In terms of individual pieces, and considering the meaning of the platoon battles, the fighting strength you have is already enough. What you should focus on next is your teamwork and level of coordination rather than chasing after individual talents."

"....."

The significance of the platoon battles was a wager between cities over the Selenium mines, a struggle that happened every two years..... The greatest goal among Academy cities was to refine their fighting strength and prepare for the Military Arts Competition rather than to construct a singularly powerful team. From the perspective of raising their overall strength, it would be best to let everyone compete with even levels of combat strength, and not to let a single powerful team win exclusively.

That was the meaning Vance was trying to convey.

"Of course, we don't have control over who joins your platoon. You're the one who chooses who joins your platoon, and you're free to ask anyone."

You're free to ask anyone - though his mouth said that, his eyes wouldn't allow Claribel to join the seventeenth platoon.

With that, Vance returned to his own seat, and Nina directed a long sigh at him.

To be honest, Nina didn't know what Claribel wanted to do at all. Her goal was quite clear. But that goal somewhat betrayed the student life.

Nina didn't know what she wanted to do with her identity as a student of the Academy City Zuellni.

Nina had also contemplated how she had fervently pulled Layfon into the platoon last year. Because of that, Nina didn't want to hastily force Claribel to join the platoon.

However, if this situation had happened last year, Nina might not have been so mentally calm.

"What do you plan on doing, Clara?"

After murmuring this, Nina returned to her seat.

◇

After Claribel said that she had other business and parted with Nina and the others, she shook off the platoon captains who tried to get in contact with her and went for a walk alone.

"Ugh....."

Though she had taken advantage of the war with Grendan to come to this Academy City, until now the recent Military Arts Competition had been over and it had been a transition period where the school prepared to enter a new term. The campus leadership team had been chosen through the student council elections, and graduates and new students came and went - a busy period with lots of people moving about, a scene that would never be seen in Grendan. Claribel had only seen this side of the campus, so it was her first time actually experiencing the platoon system.

"It's not bad, but....."

As expected, the primary problem was the Military Artists' strengths. It was obvious, but purely considering that meant staying in Grendan was the only way she could fight with more powerful opponents. As for the competition held today, fighting in a Grendan Military Arts competition like normal would be more beneficial to her. Over there, nothing was unusual about someone dominating a Military Arts competition with their strength, and you could even say that it was only because those people appeared that Military Artists would further improve their powers and motivate themselves.

Claribel placed her growth as a Military Artist first. In that regard, she felt that although Zuellni's ways and city system were very interesting, everything else was lackluster.

However, this place had things that Grendan didn't.

"That really is the most important thing."

Thinking about the answer she had obtained after long consideration made Claribel not know what to do. When she was about to fall into contemplation again..... she quickly stopped thinking.

"Well, it's best to say those things to the person directly."

After all, the time was about right, wasn't it?

Deep thought really wasn't one of her interests. After coming to her conclusion, Claribel's feet quickly moved towards her destination.

Her destination was Layfon's place, of course.

"That's how it is, so come fight."

Claribel had suddenly come here while he was eating dinner and spoken those words. After she said that, Layfon handed over the saucer of broth that he was using to taste-test.

Many things had happened since the new school year started, and Claribel now lived in the same apartment as Layfon. Layfon had only moved here due to many things that had also happened in the dorm he had lived at before. Though the household tools and cookware around him was all new, Layfon seemed already used to living here. Also, some of his friends had rented rooms in this apartment.

Because of that, people with free time would be responsible for making communal dinner, but that job almost always fell on the shoulders of Layfon and

one other person. Though Claribel could make food for herself, she mostly just helped Layfon make food in these situations.

Claribel had only recently realized that Layfon was so good at cooking, so she felt that this way of living was pretty fun.

Today too, Layfon had checked the schedules that everyone had written on the board and then started preparing dinner on his own.

"Wow, it's good."

"Ah, great."

Layfon smiled naturally at Claribel's response.

"What's today's dinner?"

"It's this soup with salad, and I plan on making something with chicken meat."

"I like herb-roasted chicken."

"Ah, got it."

"Ooh, I'm looking forward to it!"

After smiling gently at Claribel as she clapped and cheered, Layfon checked the seasoning.

In that moment, Claribel realized.

".....Ah, that's not it!"

"But I'm making dinner right now."

"Although that's important, there are more important things."

"Clara....."

When they had started living like this, Claribel had requested that Layfon call her by that nickname. Layfon had straightforwardly agreed to that request, and hence addressed Claribel that way.

Claribel froze, exposed to his stern gaze.

"W.....What?"

"Nothing's more important than eating."

"Uwah!"

Claribel had been red-faced and paralyzed by Layfon's stare, but now lost her balance as if her strings had been cut.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing....."

Claribel put on an unaffected expression as she thought.

I knew it! Right, I already knew it! I knew he was like this since Grendan!

When she heard that he was going to Grendan, where there were only girls and boys of similar age, she had worried about what might happen..... But in the end, nothing like that had occurred.

Even so, she still believed that the recent commotions might make him grow, but it seemed like that hadn't ended p happening either.

Maybe he just didn't like her as much as she hoped. Instead of worrying about that, believing that he was an incredibly dense idiot made it easier for her to keep calm mentally.

"Don't worry about that. How about we go get some exercise after eating dinner?"

But she would leave that question to the side for now. Right now, in order to realize her other desire, Claribel shifted her angle of approach and tried convincing Layfon.

"Hmm..."

Layfon showed a thoughtful expression after Claribel brought up her request. However, his hands didn't stop preparing the chicken. Claribel admired those motions as she waited for Layfon's answer.

"Unless it's like something from before, fighting with Clara would be very loud."

'From before' referred to when Layfon had infiltrated Grendan.

"Don't use a one-hit kill, and also I've trained a ton since then. This time we'll compare our overall fighting strength."

"Even so, right now is no good. It's too loud."

"W.....What do you mean, it's too loud....."

That answer almost made Claribel feel dazed. She couldn't imagine it being a reason worthy of being stressed twice.

"Y.....Your reason is that it would be a little too noisy? This is a practice between true Military Artists. If you say something like that, then what does Ruimei-sama's morning exercise turn into?"

Every morning year-round, Ruimei would punctually carry out morning practice, and the citizens of Grendan even used that morning practice as a way to tell time.

"That's really noisy. It's nice that those people who work in the night haven't complained."

"Huhh!"

The unexpected statement made Claribel lean backwards in shock.

"Once it started, I always thought 'Ugh, I have to go to school today.' And on holidays it always wakes me up when I try to sleep in."

"W.....What..... You never thought that you couldn't lose to him?"

"Uh, there are quieter training methods - that's what I think."

"What..... You never felt a sense of competition?"

"If we thought like that, the Heaven's Blades would band together and make noise, and then Her Majesty would scold us."

"Uuu....."

Maybe that was true. Come to think of it, her grandfather and her master had never expressed any opinions about Ruimei.

Claribel understood that. But the fact that she burned with a competitive spirit yet Layfon didn't made her inadvertently think about the difference between them.

"Uuu, I guess that's the difference between someone who hasn't become a Heaven's Blade and someone who has."

"Really?"

Claribel endured her deep shock. Next to her, Layfon was heating a pot that he had poured oil into.

"Clara, I think that motivation of yours is good."

"Huh?"

"But if you're like that, it really might be better to stay in Grendan....."

"It's because there's someone I can't fight in Grendan."

"Huh.....?"

"Uh, do I have to explain that for you to understand it too?"

"Huh?"

"You, it's you! Layfon Alseif! The youngest Heaven's Blade successor, the one said to have the most Kei of all the Heaven's Blades. And the one who beat Savaris-sama one-on-one, and who had an incomparably intense swordfight with that mysterious person in the battle back then. Even now, everyone in Grendan my age and younger has their eyes on surpassing you!"

"Huh~ No way."

"Don't reject it so fast, okay?"

"But I'm a criminal."

"Please don't mix the views of ordinary citizens and Military Artists together. Also, you know that the kind of Military Artist noble sentiment that Nina-senpai has is a minority in Grendan."

"Huh - I don’t think that's right. Psyharden was the source of the Salinvan Mercenary Gang, so it gets looked down on a lot. I wonder why Grendan's people hate mercenaries?"

"It's not so much their moving around a lot as much as them avoiding harsh battlefields like Grendan and running off to lukewarm battlefields in faraway cities to strut around, right?"

Thinking about it that way, it was possible that Grendan's people now thought about Claribel like that too. After noticing that, Claribel's mood worsened. She hadn't run off to a lower-skilled battlefield; she would definitely return a few years later to prove that to everyone.

"Is that so?"

"No, I haven't thought about it seriously, so I'm not sure."

"Yeah. Well, it doesn't matter."

As the two of them spoke, Layfon put the chicken, marinated with a special sauce, into the pot. Perhaps the oil had already heated up to a suitable degree.

The crisp sound of oil frying spread through the room. That sound, announcing that dinner was ready, made Claribel's mouth water.

When the pot was opened, the perfectly-fried chicken released an aroma of herbs and spices into the surroundings.

"Anyway, dinner's already done. It would be nice if you could call everyone who’s at home to come eat."

"Ah, o.....okay."

The prospect of dinner made Claribel obediently do that, and she left the room to get the others.

She wasn't good at thinking.

However, right now it seemed that she had to think.

Claribel munched on herb-roasted chicken as she watched Layfon. Felli was the only one who could make dinner tonight, so the three of them ate around the dining table in Layfon's room.

The herb-roasted chicken was extremely delicious. A sweet taste spread through the mouth, and the aroma passed into the nostrils. The amount of chicken, soup, and salad was too much, even if Layfon had planned for the maximum number of people who could potentially have been circled around this table. Though the huge amount of food surprised Claribel, the feeling that she could eat as much as she wanted made her practically forget about everything other than the delicious food, and she hastily restrained her appetite.

Did Layfon not want to fight?

He had been in low spirits since being rescued from Grendan, but recently signs of recovery had slowly showed up.

Claribel had brought up that request because of that, but Layfon's response had been as bad as she anticipated. Rather than Layfon being in low spirits, it felt more like he was leaving her behind.

Did he have no desire to fight?

But several possibilities hid inside that 'no desire'.

Does he think I'm not a match for him, or has he lost his motivation as a Military Artist?

Or does he plan on giving up being a Military Artist?

It's too early to judge.....

Claribel chewed the chicken as she thought.

But he had indeed lost the desire to fight.

In that case..... it would be troublesome. If Layfon had any sort of charm, it was because he was very strong.

That was a difficult-to-change truth for Claribel, although different people viewed him differently. People couldn't see every side to another person right after an encounter. People would first see the face and see that side, then decide their impression of the other, and then decide how they would interact with that person.

The Layfon Alseif who attracted Claribel was Layfon Wolfstein Alseif, and the power that had easily taken a Heaven's Blade successor position at a young age.

In addition to being attracted by his strong power, she wanted to surpass him because he was strong.

Also, at the same time she also hoped that he would be a tall wall. A difference in strength that couldn't be easily surmounted despite their mere one-year age difference.

Fighting strength changed very easily. Walking the line between life and death could affect the mind as well as physical ability. Once the heart gave in, the flesh would weaken like a house of cards.

If Layfon wanted to reduce his desire to fight and his thirst for battle, should she awaken those feelings?

She had to become strong. Her heart wavered..... It had been her desire to surpass Layfon that made Claribel think about this, but now it was not the case. No matter what, she had to become strong.

In order to reach that goal, Layfon had to be the Layfon from the past - no, she had to surpass the Layfon from the past.

She wanted to surpass that Layfon. At that time, she could definitely approach towards an even farther goal. Also, when that time came, Layfon would become a great help.

But what should she do.....?

In the end, she couldn't think of an answer during dinner.

◇

After long thought, her body felt incredibly tense, so Claribel ran outside to catch some fresh air and for some after-meal exercise.

She ran a loop around the outer area first. Normally, Claribel would maintain Sakkei and train her silent movement, but tonight she really wasn't in the mood for such a thing. Come to think of it, since this was the outer area, a bit of sound would be drowned out by the huge noise of the city's legs. Claribel sprinted past the outer area without holding anything back.

One loop, two loops, three loops..... When she finished her fourth loop, Claribel finally felt like stopping. She regulated her slightly heavy breathing, spreading Kei through her whole body to scatter sweat. The light of Key instantly pushed back the darkness of the night.

"Mmm."

Her body gave off a satisfied feeling of release, and Claribel nodded with a smile.

Then, what should she do next..... As she was thinking this, someone watching from the side approached her.

"What are you doing?"

Claribel had sensed that someone there on her second loop, but that person seemed to be just a passerby, so Claribel had ignored him. However, that person was not approaching her, so he must have business with her.

There actually should have been one more observer, but that person didn't approach.

"You really are different from the other students, hugely different."

Vance stood there.

"Ah, you're - uh....."

However, Claribel didn't remember his name. She had lumped Vance in as one of the many platoon captains obsessing over to recruiting her.

"I'm Vance, the captain of the third platoon."

"Oh. Then what do you need from me?"

"I want to ask you to join our platoon."

Claribel knew it was a pointless question, and she hadn’t missed the impatient look that flashed over Vance's face when she had asked it. Maybe this person was very irritable. But he was willing to take the time to approach her on his own, so Claribel felt that she ought to endure such trivial matters.

"Unfortunately, I have no interest in things like platoons right now."

Because you're so weak - in the end, Claribel didn't give those words voice. However, Claribel's thoughts were understandable. With her strength, a half-baked platoon wouldn't work out. Also, if she didn't have this much self-confidence, she would never realize her goals.

Vance seemed to find Claribel's answer unexpected.

"But as a Military Artist, protecting the city is....."

Vance elaborated on what all Military Artists ought to comply to, as well as on how to effectively use Military Artists' strengths under Zuellni's system. The platoon system was indeed very useful to use as core groups during group battles. Grendan's Military Artists underwent group battle training in order to be able to

fight cooperatively with others. But in the end, that was with the premise that those groups would be temporary. Of course teams that had been assigned beforehand would perform more effectively, since they accumulated training experience in a different way.

However, that wasn't the important point.

"Yeah~"

Vance clearly felt impatient about Claribel's vague attitude. He had even come to find Claribel this late at night, which was showed quite the enthusiasm. However, there was too much enthusiasm, so it felt a bit..... gross. Excessive enthusiasm felt repulsive. Hmm, take note of that. Claribel's maiden portion considered this.

However, in the next moment, he said something that made Claribel waver:

"You would be able to fight against Layfon Alseif of the seventeenth platoon."

"Ah....."

Right, that was it.

"Ugh, I can't believe I forgot."

How negligent. Perhaps it had been that Layfon hadn't done anything related to the platoon since Claribel came to Zuellni, so Claribel had completely overlooked the fact that he was a platoon member.

"If he doesn't want to practice with me..... then fine, if it's a platoon match..... But..... no, it's fine if I leave that to her....."

"You.....?"

After hitting that juncture, her thoughts started moving in a flash.

"Right, that's not a bad idea."

"Then do you want to join our platoon?"

"Ah, I haven't decided on that yet."

"What?"

"Well..... let me test something on my side first."

After saying that, she brought up a proposal that surprised Vance.

◇

So, the bell rang again.

"And the competition starts! This is an anomaly among anomalies, an incredible anomaly! To think that the Military Artist new student Claribel Ronsmier, wanted by many platoon captains, would turn the tables and test the strengths of the platoons! But the bigger anomaly is - not just one or two platoons accepted this request! The third, fifth, seventh, fourteenth, and sixteenth platoons, five in total, announced that they would participate in this competition! Claribel obtained victory in the new student competition held before - but no, the competition this time is proof that she's just so amazing! Which platoon will be able to obtain this much-anticipated, extraordinary rookie? We'll decide that today, on this battlefield----------!"

The female emcee's voice shot through the sky of the battlefield, exciting the people squeezed in the spectator seats.

Claribel stood in an unobstructed area near the entrance to the battlefield. Her figure was being tracked by cameras and projected to various screens in the spectator seats.

".....It feels like this has become something huge."

Layfon murmured in the spectator seats as if frightened by the loud cheers.

"Kind of."

Nina smiled wryly next to him.

"There's no Military Arts Competition this year, so this platoon won't be a round robin like last year's, it'll be a bracket competition. Also, the results of the platoon members will affect their scholarships less than last year, so platoons will have win competitions frequently. But even so, every platoon wants to strengthen their fighting power. When you think of it that way, there actually aren't that many platoons participating."

Felli replied plainly from her seat on the other side of him.

"Ah, it's because the others are angry at the way Clara's doing things."

After she said that, Nina thought of the platoon captains who had approached Claribel after the competition. The platoons who hadn't announced they would participate in this competition had definitely gotten angry at her attitude and methods.

Claribel was shown on the screen, holding the Kochouenshiken with safety gear that Harley had reproduced for her rather than the practice sword from the previous competition. New students usually couldn't hold Dites until half a year of getting used to the campus life. Only those who joined a platoon or city police could obtain permission.

She hadn't yet joined a platoon. To be honest, she ought not to be able to hold a Dite.

"It seems like this was a special provision laid down for this competition. I heard that the platoon captains participating in the competition even signed a petition."

"Really."

Claribel had definitely brought that item up as an additional condition for holding this competition. Did even someone like her feel that dealing with so many people using a practice sword would be extremely unfavorable?

No, it was purely because she felt strange holding a Dite other than the Kochouenshiken that she used. Layfon thought so.

"Come to think of it, she didn't have any interest in platoons, so why did she suddenly become like this?"

Claribel had been griping about how everyone was trying to pull her into platoons when she had eating dinner before, so Layfon brought up that question.

When Layfon mentioned how he couldn't understand her fickleness, glares shot at him from his left and right.

"......Huh? What?"

"Is it really an incurable disease?"

"Huh? Huh?"

As Layfon was confused by Felli's words, Nina explained:

"It's because she wants to fight with you. Don't you always refuse her? But if it's a platoon match, you'll have to fight with her. That's definitely what she's thinking."

"Oh....."

"How troublesome."

Felli's tone made him and Nina smile wryly.

The starting bell sounded.

◇

However good she was, Claribel couldn't fight all the platoons right from the

start. Though Claribel herself felt that might work, the platoon captains didn't agree with those methods.

So they would draw straws to decide the battle order.

The rules of the battles were: If Claribel is unable to fight, the platoon wins. If the platoon members are all unable to fight, then Claribel wins.

"Just by looking at the rules, you can see that contestant Claribel is extremely disadvantaged. But apparently, it was contestant Claribel herself who proposed these rules. How arrogant, or is that an expression of absolute self-confidence? In any case, their first opponent - the sixteenth platoon - is starting to move!"

A boom passed through the battlefield.

The sixteenth platoon had been the seventeenth platoon's first opponent last year. Just like last year, they were good at battles of speed, and as soon as the competition started five of their fighters bravely charged. They were attempting to avoid the central area with more obstacles, planning on fighting near the entrance.

"Oh?"

Claribel noticed the opponents' intent, but deliberately stayed where she was.

However, she didn't do nothing at all.

"Ohh, contestant Claribel is using a move. What is that? Kei is glowing, but we have no idea what's going on. Is it some kind of offensive technique to counterattack?"

The emcee's uncertainty was eliminated when the sixteenth platoon members passed through the central forest.

Dust kicked up by high-speed movement spat out from the forest and five platoon members flew out. They continued shortening the distance to attack Claribel accurately and simultaneously from multiple directions.

However, they couldn't do it.

"Stop there."

Claribel murmured.

Then, things changed.

External-type Kei, Karen Kei variant - Scattered Flowers.

Orbs of red light suddenly appeared in Claribel's surroundings... but not just her surroundings, they also appeared in the surroundings of the sixteenth platoon members who passed through the forest. Though they were only as small as a thumb, their numbers were - uncountable.

"What!?"

The sixteenth platoon members cried out, then their figures vanished in explosions of red light one by one.

After the light cleared, their figures slumped naturally to the ground.

".....O-Oh..... Ohhh------! This is really incredible! Really incredible! The unimaginable scene made me speechless for a moment. But what exactly is going on? To think the sixteenth platoon was instantly beaten! It's hard to believe. Is this really happening? Are we seeing some sort of illusion!?"

The spectators cheered again alongside the emcee's excited voice.

Amidst this thunderous sound of cheers, Claribel looked at Layfon.

How was that? Don't you think I'm qualified to stand before you?

She asked in her heart.

However, Layfon was replying to the two girls next to him with an ordinary, commonplace expression.

".....Ugh!"

A very disinteresting scene.

"Come on, have the next team come out!"

Claribel uttered those words as she expelled the impatience from her heart.

Claribel won easily after that.

The remaining order of the competition was the fifth, then the seventh, then the third platoons.

The fact that the competition continued meant that Claribel continued winning.

The first time they had drawn straws, the platoon captains had all believed 'I'll be able to get her if we draw first'.

However, their beliefs had already changed, changing to believe that it would be more favorable for them to go at the end, when she started to show signs of weakness.

"Impossible!"

Vance's grieved cry echoed resounded the battlefield.

"Ohh! Even the fourth team, the third platoon, has been defeated - contestant Claribel's overwhelming victory. Her fighting style hasn't shown any weakness at all - how exactly will things play out? If this goes on, will we end the battle with no platoon participating in the competition able to get her? Then she's make a record that no one has ever attained until now - winning singlehandedly against five platoons in a row!"

"Just that much would be boring."

Claribel murmured this at the emcee's words. That voice was picked up by the flakes of the Psychokinesists helping to run the competition, then amplified and broadcast to the entire area.

"Maybe I'll end up leading these five platoons..... Right, I might as well just be a squadron leader."

"Th.....There's no such system!"

Vance cried out, collapsed on the ground and waiting for medics.

"Oh? Then I would have won for nothing? I even gave myself up as a prize, but you won't give me anything when you lose? Isn't that a bit stingy?"

"......Ugh!"

Vance hadn't expected a situation like the current, so he had nothing to say.

"Ah, there's still one team after this, so the possibility that I lose hasn't completely vanished."

"! That's right! If it's Shin, if it's that guy.....!"

"Ahahahahaha! I see there are high expectations of me!"

That voice suddenly rang out.

It wasn't a voice broadcasted from the speakers set up by the operating crew.

"Ah?"

Claribel noticed that. There were several new flakes above her head, and the voice was reaching her through them.

"This voice - is it Shin?"

Vance looked up at the sky. He has also noticed the flakes.

"That's right!"

"......Shin?"

The voice responded, but Vance showed a surprised expression.

"It's finally my turn to take the stage!"

"Shin, I always thought you were lighthearted, but aren't you particularly laid-back today? No, rather than laid-back....."

"Laid-back? No, that's wrong. Starting from today, starting right now, the fourteenth platoon will be reborn!"

At the same time as that voice reached them, a new voice came from another flake - one that had already been surreptitiously positioned in the battlefield..... or more accurately, positioned above the spectator seats.

No, it was a recording.

A thirty-two-beat, extremely fast song played out through the air. It was a solemn keyboard melody interspersed with distorted, high-pitched string instruments. Combined with an original, rough percussive rhythm, it made an incomparably somber tune.

The melody produced by the trackless, intense sound filled the battlefield, attempting to create a different world.

"Come, let everyone witness the rebirth of the fourteenth platoon!"

Then, they appeared.

From the sky.

If you asked how they did it, they had probably slipped onto the top of the outer wall of the battlefield, but that kind of thing was boring when the trick was revealed.

In any case, they descended from the sky.

With pitch-black appearances.

Like envoys of the night.

Or like Rakshasa[1] leading evil demons.

The reborn fourteenth platoon descended to the area, crowned with new names.

"Teresa the Black Rose."

"God of Death Tony."

"Moon Shadow Cody."

"We are the Three Jet-Black Stars!"[2]

Military Artists wearing black clothing and with black accessories appeared there.

Then, the final person.

"And the great me! Shin, the Falcon!"

Wearing a long black coat decorated with silver chains that fluttered like a mythical bird, the fourteenth platoon leader Shin Kaihan descended from the sky.

Upon seeing that figure, Claribel.....

Doki♪[3]

◇

In the spectator seats.

Two girls stared at the figures, their bodies quivering.

".....Felli?"

"No, I have nothing to do with this."

"Uh, but no matter how I see it, this....."

"At least I didn't come up with that person's outfit."

"Why are you muttering?"

Layfon, the only one left out, looked to the girls to his left and right.

"And aren't those fighting clothes? So in that sense, this has nothing to do with me.[4] Yeah, absolutely nothing to do with me."

"But as for that nickname, come to think of it....."

"But that was just once, wasn't it? During last year's matches and Military Arts Competition, they were still dressed normally....."

"We saved our budget from last year and were thus reborn!"

Shin said. Though the timing was perfect, the words he said were a bit lackluster.

"Senpai....."

Nina covered her face.

"Under the guidance of the Silver Angel[5], we have been reborn as envoys of darkness!"

"They absolutely aren't talking about me. Yeah, definitely not. And what's up with that nickname? No way no way no way no way....." (repeat to infinity)

Felli, who began mumbling again, cringed due to some unknown pain.

As an explanation, this was the intense mental pain produced as a result of a tiny prank unexpectedly going out of control and becoming unstoppable, and her once again witnessing the embarrassing outcome.

"Uh, that..... is it..... Felli?"

"Shut up, Lay the Flash[6]!"

"Huhh? Or rather, I feel like you've called me that before. Then, did you really make those peoples' nicknames?"

"Uh, oops."

After accidentally shooting herself in the foot, Felli panicked.

As the two of them spoke, the situation on the battlefield continued.

◇

We return to the battlefield.

"Heh, heheh..... you look pretty good."

Claribel's murmur made Vance, spacing out nearby, widen his eyes in surprise.

"Heh..... I knew you'd say that."

Shin's mouth curved into a smile.

Claribel realized in that moment that Shin had been the other observer that night in the outskirts. However, that definitely wasn't something that displeased her.

"Since the moment I saw you, I knew you were a human searching for darkness. A beautiful flower that can only bloom in the darkness..... Right, the Scarlet Princess."

"A great name."

"Hey, wait! Are the two of you both serious?"

Vance was the only one present left unhappily behind in reality. However, he couldn't believe his eyes and could only put on an alarmed look.

Ignoring the dumbstruck Vance, the dramatizing two continued speaking.

"However! Without power, you cannot command me!"

Claribel shouted this, then stabbed out the Kochouenshiken. The tip of the blade shone sharply. The ruby-colored metal reacted, and crimson light scattered from the blade.

Her burning fighting spirit left Vance speechless.

However, Shin didn't move. Shin the Falcon didn't move.

Also, the Three Jet-Black Stars behind him didn't cower.

Teresa the Black Rose smiled.

God of Death Tony and Moon Shadow Cody stood there with confident expressions.

"You're mistaken."

Waves of Claribel's Kei made Shin's clothes flutter. He fearlessly approached her.

"I have no intention of commanding you. Didn't I say - you're a princess, one who commands darkness. We'll pledge allegiance to you, and our proof is - this."

Tony, standing behind him, opened the package they had prepared, and took out an outfit from inside it.

"This is.....?"

"This is the outfit of the princess who will ring the bell of victory for us."

"How....."

"But this is only temporary, so the measurements still haven't been adjusted."

After Shin quietly said that, he instantly smiled wryly.

"Come, command us, princess!"

"Of course!"

Claribel's eyes sparkled like a small girl's, her hands grabbing tightly on to the black clothes.

"For real?"

Vance made that last groan.

However, no one in this drama recognized his existence any longer. No, even if people noticed him, his role was just that of a sad fool whose enthusiasm had been perfectly manipulated by others. Though Vance noticed that fact, he was unwilling to admit it.

Claribel draped the black garment over her shoulders, and Shin the Falcon moved behind her and to her right side, with the Three Jet-Black Stars moving behind and to her left.

"Our enemy is there!"

Kochouenshiken's blade turned directions.

It pointed to the spectator seats.

"It's you! Lay the Flash!"

"Why do you know about that!?"

Layfon wailed from where he sat in the spectator seats.

A month-long commotion happened after that, and she was later named the Princess of Chaos afterwards, but we'll recount that later when there's more time.

Fire Up Spirits (The Dispute Arc, or the Helpless Day)

The deeper the black, the more beautiful the red became.

In the darkness produced by the obscured light, the princess endured the scent that made her nostrils itch. That scent was warm and exotic, and surrounded all the emotions concealed in the darkness.

She was the bearer of the sealed emotions.

Red surrounded by pitch-black.

All the emotions sealed inside..... were confusion, joy, as well as immorality..... She was the intense red that made one shudder deeply. She was also the one wholeheartedly waiting for the veil to be lifted.

Ahh, how much I look forward to those charmed by this scent, who tremble from the feeling, and then step into the midst of this darkness.

"Hey! It's really dark here, can I open the curtains?"

That voice reached her ears as she shivered from her fantasies in the darkness.

"Honestly, what are you doing? The feeling is perfect right now."

"But it's so dark here I can't see myself."

A new voice continued speaking.

"That's not a big deal, right?"

The Princess of Darkness was quite indignant. Her mood had been so good, but the voice of reality had ruined everything.

"It's too dark here. We can't see anything at all if you block the light so completely."

"Uuu....."

"Tony's really scared, so if possible I'd like to open the curtains."

"Why?"

"Because that guy's scared of the dark."

"Honestly!"

If he was scared of the dark, there was no helping it. The Princess of Darkness stood up and walked to the window to open the curtains, in place of the other three who couldn't move because it was too dark.

Light shone into the room and drove away the darkness.

The Princess of Darkness..... Claribel unhappily turned around, black lace fluttering, and the figures of the three sitting on the sofa appeared in her eyes.

They were Teresa, Tony, and Cody, three people of the fourteenth platoon.

"Hey, why are the three of you not wearing those clothes?"

Claribel, wearing her Princess of Darkness outfit, crossed her arms, glaring at the outfits of the three of them.

School wasn't in session today, but the three of them wore their uniforms.

"Uh, because it's a holiday today....."

Cody answered on behalf of the three. His body was frail, but he was very tall, and if he stood up Claribel would have to look up to see him. Even though he was sitting on the sofa, he was taller than the other two by a head.

"Walking around all the time wearing that is a bit....."

Tony's face looked a bit pale, and cowardice showed on his fat cheeks.

"But we're holding photography sessions regularly."

Teresa tried to alleviate the atmosphere with a weak smile, but Claribel's anger burned fiercer.....

"Sorry to bother~ Oh, you're all here? Uh, Lon isn't here. Well, that guy's the same shut-in as always."

The sound of the door opening rang out and the platoon captain Shin entered the room. As expected, he wore his uniform, which finally made Claribel's anger explode.

"All of you, line up!"

At Claribel's order, the three on the sofa hastily stood up, and Shin also joined their line. They had pulled Claribel into their platoon with such inspiring acting when they had competed for her, but now it looked like that atmosphere was completely gone.

That made her unhappy.

"You all have no spirit! Why don't you properly wear your outfits!"

"Uh, because....."

"Umm--"

"Yeah."

The three stated their thoughts with odd expressions.

"Uh, it's because we'd have to go in front of the disciplinary committee if we got in trouble today. The student council is pretty serious about modifying the uniform."

In an emergency, the student uniforms they wore served as personal identification, and also displayed their positions, so the school rules had strict provisions that modifying the uniform was disallowed.

"We can't do what we did with the fighting clothes."

Wearing fighting clothes implied that one was a Military Artist, so there was just a bare-bones provision that said their functionality needed to be proved. That said, doing too much to them would draw attention, so actually only platoon members whose strengths were recognized would modify their fighting clothes.

"Can you change them just a bit?"

"Ah, we could put a logo on them."

Shin's answer made Claribel look up and sigh.

"Ahh, really! In that case, then we'll have to make do with our casual clothes..... Uh..... Come to think of it, what should we call this platoon?"

"The fourteenth platoon."

"No, that's not what I'm asking, there should be a name more appropriate for our atmosphere, right?"

"We have to go that far?"

"We have to."

"It's not good to go too far."

"What's wrong with going too far, it's only good that way."

"Um, then I'll think about it. On another note, what's today's meeting for?"

This was Claribel's room. At her command, all of the fourteenth platoon except for their Psychokinesist had arrived here.

"The main topic is another matter. We should first decide on a team name."

"Hmm..... Teresa, what do you think?"

"Huh? Me? Uh....."

Teresa kept blinking at Shin with a troubled expression.

"Well, you won't know what to say when you get asked that so suddenly. Ah, oh well. Tony and Cody, you think too, and talk about it with us if you think of something."

"Ohh....."

"What is it?"

"You look frivolous on the outside, but you're not a bad captain."

"Ahahahaha! I'm amazing, right!?"

Claribel thought Shin would get mad, but didn't imagine he would stick out his chest instead. Maybe he was unexpectedly magnanimous.

"Well, let's put this matter to the side for now. It's not the main topic, right?"

"Yeah..... Ah, but the clothes--"

"Alright, alright."

Claribel pouted as Shin placated her. That wasn't the main topic. Though it wasn't the main topic, Claribel hoped to be able to cultivate that kind of atmosphere all the time. After all, that was the reason Claribel had chosen this platoon.

"In that case, I don't need to stay in this platoon in particular....."

"I understand. Our casual clothes should be in as much black as possible, okay? Is that alright?"

"......The platoon name....."

"That too, let's talk about it once I think up a good name. Okay?"

"Ugh....."

It felt like he was trying to appease her. A hard-to-describe displeasure made Claribel puff her cheeks out.

"Alright, alright. Don't be like that, what business do we have for today?"

"Fine. Then, let's enter the main topic."

Claribel changed the topic, standing up straight and facing the four of them.

"Today's topic is related to our enemy - Layfon Alseif."

"It really is about that, huh."

"No, well..... He's Lay the Flash, an apostle of light who hates the darkness."

"Hmm, well, it's that kind of setting, I guess."

"Please don't say anything like 'setting'."

Though Claribel thought that way too, it was a bit of a buzzkill to be told that by someone else.

"But we decided our goal was to be a theatrical platoon, so it's good to have an enemy."

"Don't say theatrical..... Come to think of it, what's 'theatrical'?"

"Hmm? Ah, it means our main purpose is to put on a show. Glamorous style combined with dramatic lines. To Military Artists, battlefields are important places where they train themselves, but to spectators, seeing how much power the people who protect their city have is also meaningful. But among the spectators are also people who enjoy the fights between Military Artists as a form of entertainment, and there are quite a few of those people."

"Ah, that's right."

"So we want to pay more attention to that group. But when you think about it, the other platoons don't approve of that thinking, and if you want to fight theatrically, you have to even plan on who wins and loses. But in that case, the battle would just become an ordinary play. That's meaningless to Military Artists. So I planned on first dressing up extravagantly before anything else, even if we're the only ones doing that, so I called us a theatrical platoon. Well, it's an experiment."

"I see."

".....Let me first ask, you weren't thinking that we actually dressed like that and spoke those kinds of lines all the time, right?"

"Ahahaha, of course not!"

Claribel said this, but she couldn't deny that her voice was a bit hoarse.

".....But, I think that at least our fans wish that we were usually like that, right?"

"Hmm, maybe."

"So our casual clothes really should be black, and we should wear as much silver as possible when we wear uniforms."

"Okay, okay."

"Then let's return to the main topic, let's not talk about settings anymore!"

"Okay--"

After restoring the atmosphere, Claribel took a deep breath.

"The important point is that he has no motivation, and fighting with him when he's weak isn't interesting at all."

"Won't we be more likely to win?"

Teresa tilted her head and made a confused expression.

"Just winning is meaningless. To me, what's important is surpassing the real him."

"That's true."

"Yeah."

"Uh, why does Layfon-kun have no motivation?"

Tony timidly raised his hand.

"No, more importantly, since when did he start being unmotivated? If the Layfon we know has been in an unmotivated start from the very beginning, then....."

"He was very cool when the horde of filth monsters attacked before."

Cody's murmur overlapped with Teresa's words.

"Yeah, although he uses a different Dite, I feel during platoon matches that his strength is clearly on a different level. I've always thought, what if he's been holding back during platoon matches?"

"In that case, we have no chance of winning at all."

Tony's face turned pale and he shivered at Cody's speculation.

"I don't know what he was like last year, so I can't give an opinion. But I'm here now, so that's why we can think about surpassing him, right?"

Claribel encouraged the apprehensive three.

"From what I heard, he doesn't use steel threads in platoon matches. Installing safety equipment on his steel threads would be meaningless, so I can understand why the school doesn't let him use steel threads in competition. The steel threads can become any weapon he imagines, but his specialty is sword fighting after all, so we don't need to think about how to deal with weapons meant to combat filth monsters."

"You're pretty knowledgeable. If I recall, you were born in the same city, right?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, so that's it? So you came here to chase after him?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Ohh! How is it, how is it, any romantic stories of love?"

"No, there's no such thing."

"Whaat, how boring."

"But you still followed him. Ah, that's not a bad feeling."

Teresa mentioned that topic, her expression lighting up.

"A girl coming here chasing after a guy who ignores her..... how nice. It will definitely make lots of romantic stories."

"Ah, do you like those kinds of things, Teresa?"

"I do. Captain, do you not?"

"Well, I prefer something feeling more straightforward."

"Even more than this?"

"Sleeping together the day of an encounter and then starting to develop a relationship isn't bad."

"Ah!"

Shin felt that he had given some kind of profound opinion, but Teresa covered her face and staggered. 'Ah, so they had that kind of relationship.' Claribel realized.

"Right, that made me think of something. Now that I think about it, I introduced a senpai who was in the platoon last year but who's graduated now to Layfon. Through my connection to Sharnid."

"What!?"

"That senpai's the kind to attack directly. I wonder how it went? I still don't know how things ended up."

"W.....W.....W.....What did you say!?"

That was bad. She hadn't thought such a terrifying thing would have happened this year unbeknownst to her. Claribel regretted. She really should have come here with Layfon back then.

"W.....What do you mean 'attack directly'? Also, who is the platoon senpai you're talking about? She couldn't have been the captain, right?"

Teresa also looked at Shin with an anxious expression.

"Ah, no, I'm not her type, and she's not my type, so there's nothing at all between us."

"I..... I see."

Claribel glanced at Theresa's relieved appearance, then thought of something.

".....Shin, you're not the kind of person who's all talk and no action[7], are you?"

"Don't call me that!"

Claribel felt like Shin was a bit off compared to her master Troyatte, who was libido incarnate, so she tried saying that phrase. Combined with her mood of wanting to escape reality when faced with a shocking fact, Claribel's words ended up sounding particularly grating.

"It's just that no girl to kindle my romance has appeared yet."

Shin was clearly shaken.

"Oh my, but you'd do it with anyone, right?"

"Not just anyone....."

"For example, what about Teresa-senpai who's standing over there?"

"Hah?"

"What?"

Claribel's proposal made Teresa make a strange noise of surprise.

"You're not satisfied with her looks?"

"Uh, that's not it....."

"Then go do what you want in the room over there."

"No..... No, suddenly doing that would be a bit..... You understand, right?'

Shin looked at Teresa. Though she was covering her hands with her face, the crimson face that showed from the gaps between her fingers gave off the same feeling.

Tony and Cody, the two with weak presences, watched the scene with bated breath.

"Uh....."

"Go on, go on."

"....."

"....."

"....."

The four of them looked at Shin. Shin was frozen, his forehead sweating under their gazes.

"Go on."

"....."

"Go on."

"....."

"Go on, go on."

"I'm sorry, please forgive me."

"All talk, no action."

"Uuu....."

Shin collapsed to the ground after Claribel coldly uttered those words.

"No, but - Teresa is an important platoon member, so forcing myself on her would be a bit..... Right, Teresa!?"

Shin looked to Teresa for help, desperately grabbing on to a thread of hope, but.....

"....."

"Um, Teresa-san?"

""".....All talk no action."

"Guaaah!"

His hope crumbled brilliantly.

Shin lay trembling on the floor, as if he had become part of the carpet. The two males console him from the side: "Captain, you weren't wrong." Claribel ignored the two of them and clapped her hands to regain control of the situation.

"Okay, Shin's uselessness isn't important anymore. More importantly is how we should get Layfon to give it his all."

"In this kind of situation, we really should use Clara-chan's female charm....."

"Teresa..... Did some weird switch of yours get flipped?"

Cody rebutted in place of the still-quivering Shin. However, the girls were no longer listening to what the guys said.

"If that move were effective, things wouldn't be this troublesome....."

"Right! It's all because we talked about that guy that I became this miserable! What's his deal? Has he done it? Or has he not?"

Shin shouted this, having recovered. He had an angry look on his face. Though it was obvious that he just wanted that brat to share his suffering, his motivation happened to be consistent with the girls' concerns.

"What happened with that senpai?"

Though Shin's anger was irrelevant, Claribel was concerned about that outcome.

"What happened..... Uh..... I didn't ask, but it seemed like the senpai had a very satisfied expression."

"What!?"

A very satisfied expression? What did it mean to have a very satisfied expression?

Did that mean they did it, or not?

"Ah, come to think of it, I remember that senpai said something like 'As I thought, just hooking up is no good'..... Gaah, if I knew beforehand I would have asked for more details!"

"Really."

Claribel stewed as she considered the possibilities. She didn't necessarily have to be Layfon's first, but that didn't mean she could allow him to have relationships with others.

"Ugh..... That senpai's already gone, so he shouldn't have a relationship with her anymore....."

"Does he still miss her or something?"

"If that were possible, then before, in Grendan, he would have....."

No, she couldn't completely dismiss that possibility, right?

"It couldn't be....."

If parting with her in Grendan had been a deep blow to him - even if she wondered that now, it did no good. But if that senpai had become his source of comfort, how would things have turned out?

"There are a lot of stories where useless men escape from reality through women's bodies."

Although it wasn't nice to say that..... Layfon seemed.....

"He's very suited to that kind of role, how troublesome."

Had he become despondent and lost his motivation because that senpai graduated and left?

"If that's the case, things make sense."

In other words, seduction would be effective on him.

"Meaning I'll have to use that move?"

"That's what I said, that's what I said!"

Teresa excitedly expressed approval.

"Uh, in that case, right now I should....."

"A nighttime attack."

"Right."

The two of them nodded at each other.

"The problem is, how do I infiltrate his room?"

After all, Layfon was a veteran Military Artist. Even if Claribel used Sakkei, she didn't know if she could get close to him.

"It has nothing to do with that, right? Just walk into his room normally, then charm him with alluring clothing."

"Alluring..... Like a black lace nightgown?"

"Maybe? In this situation, deliberately wearing completely normal sleepwear might not be bad, and then tell him something like 'I don't want to sleep alone tonight' with teary eyes."

"Ohh, I see. Teresa-senpai, you're amazing."

"Yeah, it's because someday I'll use that move on the person I like, right!?"

She used a strong tone at the end and shot out a glare at the same time. Shin, who was crawling back up, crumpled down again.

"I think Layfon's different from Shin, his relationships with girls are exactly what they look like. But if that situation is real, then right now I have to do my best."

"Yeah, good luck!"

"Right, I'll become a woman! And this is also for you, Teresa!"

Motivated by Teresa's spirit of self-sacrifice, Claribel made a fist and resolved herself.

Just then.....

"Um~"

One of the two guys who had been completely forgotten by everyone..... Tony, timidly raised his hand.

"What is it?"

"Uh, it's a bit hard to say, uh....."

"What is it? Speak clearly."

"Um..... The topic changed from fighting with Layfon-kun to pushing him down in a completely different sense. Is that really okay?"

"That's just a triviality!"

"Uh, sorry, sorry."

Teresa's indignant exclamation made Tony cringe.

"Honestly..... Isn't that right, Clara-chan?"

"....."

"Clara-chan?"

"Ah, no, how should I say it..... Yeah, that's right. Fighting and pushing him down are different. And he might not be able to fight me seriously if I push him down. Well, considering him, that's definitely true."

"What are you saying, Clara-chan? Love is a battle. It's life or death! It's also an incredible battle, so surpass him!"

"Ah, no, sorry. Now I feel like that kind of 'surpassing' is a bit....."

She seemed to have lost control because strange information had reached her ears. Claribel took deep breaths to calm herself down.

Right, whatever he does with other people doesn't matter. Right now, what's important is.....

No, she really was concerned about that matter, but there would be other opportunities to dig into that matter so it was better to leave it to the side for now. What she had to think about now was what to do to have a real battle against him. But she really was concerned about that matter. Yeah, very concerned. What should she do, should she just go for it? But but but.....

Knock knock.

The sudden sound of a doorknock made everyone jump from fight.

"Clara, are you here?"

That voice frightened them again.

Speak of the devil, it was Layfon's voice.

"I..... I'm here, come in."

"You didn't write your schedule for tonight..... Are you going to be out?"

After coming in from the living room, Layfon looked at the fourteenth platoon members in the room and spoke. He had long since felt their presences and judged that there were people in the room, but he hadn't thought they would be Shin and the rest.

"Ah, well? What should we do?"

The second half of what was a question for Shin.

"Well, uh, that's fine. We can find somewhere to eat."

Shin, who had been lying flat on the ground until just now, unconsciously rose and acted normal. His transformation speed was surprising.

When she joined the fourteenth platoon, Nina had emotionally vouched for him for whatever reason: "That senpai's an incredible person. Even though he looks like that! Despite what he looks like!" But maybe the speed at which he changed his attitude was a reason she respected Shin.

"Really? Then it'll just be Felli and I eating dinner."

"Hold on. Maybe I should stay behind to eat dinner."

"Huh? But....."

"I want to stay for dinner."

"Really? I'm fine either way..... Ah!"

"Huh?"

Layfon's expression suddenly changed, and that reaction alarmed Claribel. Had he noticed something? What was it? Her own feelings? Or the plot they had been talking about?

"That's no good, I didn't even bring out any tea."

After saying that, Layfon walked into the kitchen and started to boil water.

"Uh..... Ah, sorry."

Come to think of it, Shin and the others had come over but he hadn't prepared anything at all. Claribel's face reddened from the embarrassment of over-thinking things and from not even providing this common courtesy.

"No no, we also came empty-handed, so it's fine."

Though he said that, no one stopped Layfon from making tea. The water boiled on the gas stove whistled.

"In that case, do you want to stay for dinner?"

"Huh, can we?"

"It should be okay."

"Then thank you very much."

"You're welcome."

As the two of them had this conversation, Claribel moved to a location he couldn't see, then desperately pressured Shin's back with her gaze.

(Ask, ask! Ask!)

She used her mental force as if trying to dig a hole there. Shin's body twitched. That mental force had definitely reached him. In that case, hurry up and ask! If you don't open our mouth here, you're definitely all talk and no action. I'll call you a coward!

".....Ah~ right, Layfon."

"Hmm?"

Layfon, preparing to turn off the stove, looked at Shin.

"Before, well - didn't I introduce one of my platoon's senpai to you?"

"Uh..... Ah, right. Minaris-senpai."

Layfon answered indifferently. Claribel carefully observed his expression - nothing had changed on it at all. Layfon had a somewhat absentminded look, like normal.

"How did that go?"

"What do you mean?"

"Uh, a lot of things happened between you two, right? Didn't I say that the senpai was very aggressive when I introduced you?"

"Oh."

"So how was it? Did you see her amazing parts?"

"Yeah."

"You saw!?"

The shocking confession made Claribel's entire body pale.

However, there was no shame, embarrassment, anger, or pride on Layfon's expression at all. Rather, it was as blank as always.

Actually, it was Claribel's reaction that made him take a 'what's wrong?' expression.

"Huh? Ah, well..... Rather than saying I saw, it's more like..... Senpai's clothes were very suggestive."

"Very suggestive?"

"Her clothes?"

"Yeah."

"Uh..... Ah, come to think of it, she had a ton of clothes. I think her family mailed them over."

"That doesn't matter. So! What happened afterwards?"

"Huh? We drank coffee and watched a movie, and then ate dinner..... That day was a bit cold, so I lent her my coat....."

"And then!"

"I sent her home and then went back home."

".....Hah?"

"Uh, isn't that normal? Is anything strange?"

"No, it's not strange....."

"Right. Here, the tea's ready."

"T.....Thank..... you....."

"Then, I'm going to go make dinner."

"Ah, um..... thanks."

After leaving the steaming tea in front of the speechless fourteenth platoon members, Layfon left the room.

".....Honestly?"

Shin said that, dazed, his eyes staring into the hallway as if pursuing Layfon's shadow.

"You know what suggestive clothes means, right? Senpai was like that, you know? She'd war things that made people think, 'she's wearing that? Can she really wear that?' Those kinds of clothes, you know? And she looked pretty suggestive, you know? And the way she acted was also really like that, you know? He was able to ignore all of that? There was someone like that next to him going 'come on anytime', but why didn't he do it?"

"Well, you wouldn't have done anything either."

"Guooh!"

Shin fell to the floor again, scathed by Teresa's ice-cold words.

Claribel stood there, a bit disappointed. Confusion and relief mixed together and kept whirling around inside her heart.

To be honest, confirming that matter was only a minor move in terms of her current goal. Even so, that fact had still brought relief as well as a sense of loss.

There was relief that nothing had happened at all, and.....

"That means a half-baked effort will be ineffective against him."

Thinking carefully, Layfon had many girls around him who had feelings for him, and those girls were all very pretty, but Layfon was completely oblivious to this. Could such a thing happen with a normal guy? He should have noticed even if he didn't want to, right? Putting aside the way he responded to those feelings, normally he shouldn't be able to maintain his normal attitude.

However, Layfon maintained his normal attitude, and still wore that bland expression.

Did that mean that a half-baked effort couldn't break through that thick wall?

"Hehehe, that wall truly is tall and thick....."

"Uh, it seems like we're getting off topic again."

Tony's weak words didn't seem to reach Claribel's ears. No, it was better to say he saw things that way. A resigned atmosphere radiated from Tony after he said that, and Cody standing next to him gave off the same kind of feeling. Teresa didn't pay those words any heed because of Shin, and Shin was still collapsed on the ground.

But those words reached Claribel's ears.

Of course it was important to get to his heart, but surpassing him was more important. That matter had nothing to do with male-female relationships, and to Claribel, it was fate that she couldn't ignore. It was true that male-female relationships were involved in why it had to be him, so to be honest it was very troublesome.

"Hehehe, I'm feeling motivated."

In any case, nothing had happened between him and that senpai. Since she had succeeded in confirming that fact, she ought to take it as a good thing.

All that was left was to lure out Layfon's motivation.

"Come, let's continue our strategy meeting!"

"I still really think it should be a nighttime attack!"

"Uh, we've already talked enough about that topic!"

Teresa spoke dramatically and passionately, but Claribel bluntly interrupted her.

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After making a sharp correction towards the right direction (as this had originally been the main topic), Teresa kept berating Claribel as a 'traitor' and 'coward', and at that point Shin stealthily slipped out of the room.

"Man, it's hot."

Shin felt as if he were about to drown, engulfed by the heat from being cooped up in the room and the flaring emotions. Shin passed through the doorway and walked into the cold air of the hallway, managing to regain his composure.

"But the effects were better than I imagined."

Shin murmured this as he inhaled, then thought about whether to return to the room.

.....He didn't want to go back right now if possible.

Shin was already very confused, and had already exhausted himself, and could vaguely perceive that he was about to lose it. Right now he wanted to prolong his time.

"Well, things will be tough from tomorrow onwards if I ran away."

After all, no matter how that atmosphere was, it was still a very important meeting for the fourteenth platoon.

"Ah, but I don't have to go in right away."

It would be best if the temperature inside the room cooled down a bit. After deciding this, Shin started walked unsteadily towards the stairs.

This was a very old building full of a lonesome atmosphere, but traces that the new residents were doing their best could be seen everywhere. Shin advanced through the hallway that was old yet kept very clean. After he noticed the name card that he was looking for, he knocked on the door.

"Who is it?"

"Sorry to bother."

Shin grasped the door handle. It wasn't locked. At the same time as the sound of a response reached him, Shin pushed open the door.

"Huh? What's wrong?"

After peeking out from the kitchen, Layfon looked confusedly at shin.

"I came to get some fresh air."

"Oh."

The living room here was quite large, as if its price came at the cost of inaccessibility. But other than the tables meant for many people, there was only a single lonesome sofa placed here. Shin sat on the sofa and then leaned back as far as he could.

"My, that girl of yours has quite the personality."

"Hahaha."

Maybe instantly realizing that he was talking about Claribel, Layfon just put on a faint smile.

"But her combat skills are the real deal."

"I realized that long ago."

The competition to welcome the new students along with the other competition that had been held let Shin sufficiently understand that truth.

"It seems like she came to us in order to fight with you. Well, things will be interesting from now on, huh?"

"Haha....."

"Lay the Flash."

".....Please don't call me that."

Layfon pleaded with an expression of true loathing.

"You hate it that much?"

"Isn't it very embarrassing?"

"Then what about us?"

In front of Layfon was the man who had declared himself 'Shin the Falcon' to the audience on the competition battlefield.

"......Ah, no....."

"Well, it's fine if you understand."

"Oh."

The idea had come from someone else, but he had been the one who decided to do this. Even so, Shin had worried about whether he had made the wrong choice before he did it, and had constantly been in a cold sweat.

"Honestly, sometimes I feel that it's very embarrassing."

"Then why do you still do it? Captain was practically crying."

The captain Layfon spoke of was Nina, of course. The diligent and upright Nina would definitely be unable to understand those ways. The other platoon captains had all expressed their protest as well.

Then, why did he do this?

That was a natural question. But there was still something he couldn't talk about, so Shin couldn't give the answer so easily. However, if the embarrassment was the only negligible resistance stopping him, he would be able to tell him.

"I'm fine with telling you, but you have to agree to something."

"Huh?'

"You have to fight seriously with Clara."

"Ah....."

Layfon, who had been cooking in the kitchen while looking at Shin, stopped after he said this. He put on a troubled smile. What was the reason this guy didn't want to fight? Shin felt a bit interested. However, Shin didn't pursue that curiosity to its roots. Layfon would have long since told Claribel about his reasons if he could. Maybe Claribel already knew that, and Layfon also realized that she knew that, but the two of them believed both believed they shouldn't tell the other about it.

"Well, I don't know what you plan on doing, but she won't stop if you don't fight with her."

"Oh....."

After making that vague response, Layfon moved his gaze back to the kitchen. He didn't look up at Shin. Maybe Layfon was conscious of Shin's presence in his mind, but he seemed to have no intention of restarting their interrupted conversation.

Did he like it quiet, or was he just completely ignoring him?

It was the first time Shin had carefully observed Layfon like this. It wasn't that Shin had no interest in what kind of a person Layfon was, but his Military Artist self had kept him inadvertently focused on Layfon's overwhelming strength, and hence other parts had been obscured. Maybe it had been enough knowing that the two of them went to the same school, or that Layfon was one of the members of the many competing platoons. Even if he investigated his strength and tried to find weak points, he wouldn't investigate his behavior. Even if he investigated Layfon's personal matters and noticed that his weak points were there, how would he attack those weak points to obtain victory? That was what Shin thought.

How much meaning was there in the filed-away Academy City results? If he didn't have any strength consistent with his results, everything would end up coming back to him.

However, right now he had to bring forth this person's strength in a competition.

If doing this would inspire Claribel or even his entire platoon, then understanding Layfon was something he had to do as the platoon captain.

Okay, then how should he spark this person's motivation? Claribel, who had overlapping interests with him, might not be able to think of a good answer.

In that case, then it's up to me to do it.

Shin thought to himself as he considered what to say.

"Anyway, are you not interested?"

"Huh?"

"Are you not interested in the reason I did something like that?"

"No, it's because....."

"Ah, will you promise? I'd be really happy if you were willing..... But I'll be lonely if you just shut your mouth completely. Do you really have no interest in your senpai's deep thoughts? Isn't that mean? Yeah, it's really mean. It's really mean to have no interest in your senpai. Is it good to have such a kouhai? No, it's not. Nina would definitely be crying in heaven."

"Uh, Captain hasn't died."

Shin looked at Layfon's confused expression, heaving a sigh that even he himself felt was annoying. Would these kinds of methods be effective? He observed his kouhai's expression. Layfon hadn't gotten angry about his concerns as a senpai, he just had on a confused expression.

"Uh, then can I ask for the reasons?"

"I~ feel like your question is very forced."

"Th.....That's not true."

A slight atmosphere of irritation radiated from Layfon's flustered appearance. It looked like now was the moment for him to strike.

"Guess there's no helping it."

Though he said that, Shin still spoke somewhat dramatically:

"Well, it's a kind of way to improve our mental states."

"Improve your mental states?"

The phrase he hadn't heard before made Layfon tilt his head and put on a confused expression.

"It's a term I made up for now."

Shin smiled wryly and continued speaking:

"Our platoon members, well, they're a bit plain. I'm not talking about power, but rather appearance and personality."

"Oh."

Perhaps thinking of Teresa and the others, Layfon looked slightly upwards at the ceiling.

"They're all at a disadvantage because of their personalities, but they're very strong. Even if I left them alone, it wouldn't really affect our platoon results, but....."

After coming this far, Shin felt a bit at a loss for words. It really was very embarrassing to say such things.

"Well, but, if I just graduated like this I'd wonder 'is this alright', you know?"

"Huh?"

"I'd graduate from Zuellni and then return to my home city. I've grown in terms of Military Arts. Well, that's not bad. Everyone braves some danger to leave their hometown, so I have to progress in Military Arts at the very least."

"Yeah, maybe."

"But wouldn't it be boring if that were all?"

"Huh?"

"If it were just progress in Military Art, then wouldn't coming here honestly be meaningless? Maybe there are more suitable places out there, right? Your hometown Grendan has such powerful Military Artists. Though I don't know if any such places exist, if there are places that specialize in training foreign Military Artists, wouldn't it be better to travel there instead of Zuellni?"

"Uh..... There isn't anywhere that specializes in those kinds of things."

"That's just as an example, it's not important right now that there aren't actually any of those places."

"Oh."

"Then after traveling, and after Military Arts, everything will be boring. Since I came all the way here, of course I'd want to be happy I came to this place, right?"

"Yeah."

"It's fine to create memories that make me think that way, but I feel that's not enough."

"So that's the reason for your 'improvement'?"

"Yeah, I don't want to completely deny their personalities, but sometimes being like that puts us at a disadvantage. That's why I'm improving them with that method."

"That's the method?"

"That's the method."

Layfon had on a strange expression. It wasn't clear whether he understood or not. Shin though Layfon would have been more moved, so this expression made him feel regretful.

"What, these are words that would move Nina to tears."

"Yeah, maybe. But I'm very surprised."

Layfon said this, and Shin felt as if some unknown emotion flickered over his face.

Shin didn't know the true identity of that emotion.

But perhaps it was the thing holding Layfon back right now - he thought.

"Well, if possible, I'd want to treat the most antisocial person of our platoon, but that guy's hard to deal with."

"Haha....."

"Ah, you don’t believe me. Our Psychokinesist has a pretty strong case of antisocialism, I even feel like he shouldn't have come to an Academy City."

"......Really?"

"Yeah. Well, he's just a shut-in, ant it seems like he doesn't actually hate lively festivals, so maybe his life is surprisingly fulfilling. Maybe that guy doesn't need to change."

"Oh."

Layfon showed an expression of not knowing how to respond, and Shin looked at him and said with a smile:

"Well, you should enjoy your campus life a bit too."

After stating those words, Shin stood up. After saying "I'm looking forward to dinner" to the Layfon who was unsure whether to escort him back or not, he left the room.

Right, it would be a shame if he didn't properly enjoy it.

Shin thought so. He had come all the way here, so it would be a shame if he only had painful memories. Even if there was no pain, it would be just as much of a shame if there was nothing worth remembering.

Shin had a dream.

That was - he hoped his platoon members would say 'that guy was terrible' when they thought of him. Of course, he didn't intend for them to say those words out of hatred. Either saying it with a wry smile or while feeling a warm nostalgia would be fine.

Though his methods were a bit messy, Shin still hoped that they would remember him in their hearts as a good memory. Was that wish excessive? Or selfish?

"But the deed's almost done."

Shin had made his platoon perform such an exaggerated act in front of an audience, so of course he couldn't say something like 'I guess that's enough', nor did he plan to. Fortunately, the platoon members hadn't expressed their opposition. Had they accepted the methods, or were they already resigned to it, or did they just think of him as a joker?

"It's a bit unsightly to show my true thoughts."

But..... Well, even that was fine. Even if it was a bit unsightly, as long it allowed him to reach his goal, it was alright.

"Shameful, yet very cool."

That was something that the captain at the time had said when he entered the platoon. Though Shin hadn't paid attention to it at the time, he had thought of that saying after the person graduated, and now he could understand its implications.

Though he had more or less mixed it with his own interpretation, that didn't matter. Maybe it was something that would end up creating memories if he handed it down.

"Yeah."

Shin thought of the distant past and the future, a mischievous smile on his face as he walked back to Claribel's room.

Just then.

He felt the presence of someone walking up the stairs.

Shin thought that a platoon member had come to find him after being absent from the room.

"......Ah."

"Uwah!"

But that wasn't the case.

"......What are you doing?"

Though the other person's tone was flat, she expressed a deep suspicion.

"Ah, we were having a gathering in Clara's room."

It was Felli.

Felli was in front of him.

"A fathering? Your platoon?"

Felli raised an eyebrow.

"......Is it for 'that'?"

At this time, there was no need to ask what the 'that' Felli spoke of was.

"Uh, well."

"So it is for 'that'."

"Guah!"

The killing intent her voice carried rendered Shin unable to fight back.

"Uh, but....."

Hadn't Felli decided the idea herself - or rather, the nicknames and the clothes..... Shin really wanted to say that, but even so.

"What?"

"......Nothing."

Shin's words were meaningless before the silent pressure.

"Please sit over there."

"......Okay."

Shin couldn't defy Felli's words. As for why, it was because she was Felli, and Shin was Member Number 4 of the Felli Loss Fan Club. Shin, who took pride in being numbered in the single digits, couldn't disobey her words.

"Think about things a little before acting, alright?"

"Sorry."

"Don't you think everyone would feel ashamed after you did such a thing?'

"Sorry."

"And honestly....."

Felli's anger didn't seem to be stopping.

"......Ah, found him."

Had she deliberately chosen this moment? She had really picked an unfortunate time to interrupt.

Claribel, along with Teresa and the others, showed up being Felli's back. Seeing Shin's expression, they instantly displayed anger, but their expressions changed after observing Shin's situation from behind Felli's back.

The figure of the platoon captain as he knelt in the corner left them speechless.

The captain's shameful appearance left them dumbstruck.

"......What are you smiling about?"

"......Huh?"

Shin noticed that he was smiling when Felli said this.

"......I'm not smiling....."

"Huh, is that....."

"So the captain had those interests....."

Teresa and Claribel huddled together, looking fearfully at Shin as if they were looking at something dirty.

Shin touched his cheek. It was very hot.

This..... Could this feeling be--

No, he felt like he had never felt more pained mentally. However, no matter how mad she got, he was doing all of this for his goals, definitely not to put the spotlight on her. Though he had made up a nickname for her, in the end she was the one who had named him, and he hadn't planned on making her real name public. So even if he endured her anger, there was no need to reflect or be scared.

Even so, he was still kneeling here like this. The reason was because he was a single-digit member of the Felli Loss Fan Club, so he could only dutifully endure her anger.

As for being willing, or even happy about it.....

Definitely not.....

.....That was what he thought, but--

"Wh.....What's up with that face....."

As Shin felt shaken, Felli's embarrassed tone gave him the final blow. Her poker face had crumbled somewhat. Did that mean that his current level of disgustingness was enough to even break through a Psychokinesist's special poker face?

This can't be the start of a new world for me, right?

Could I have awakened at this kind of time?

Shin was speechless.

"Uwah, what should we do....."

Claribel looked at Shin like she were looking at garbage.

"No way....."

Teresa wore an expression of despair.

"Uuu....."

Felli was speechless.

"Captain....."

Even Tony and Cody kept him at arm's length.

"I didn't think you were interested in being abused....."

As if Claribel's words were the final blow, everyone's ice-cold gazes became chilling blades that pierced through Shin.

But, even that.....

(Will my platoon be alright.....)

Shin looked up at the sky.

However, there was only an old ceiling there.

Fire Up Spirits (The Conclusion Arc, or the Insatiable Futile Challenge)

His nose itched.

"Achoo!"

Layfon was holding things in both his hands, so he chose a place that would be affected as little as possible and then sneezed loudly.

Felli, who stood next to him with murderous intent, glared at Layfon even more angrily.

"That's dirty."

"......Sorry."

This was the kitchen of Layfon's room. Layfon was making dinner, and Felli was next to him holding a vegetable peeler challenging her peeling technique.

"Uh, it's best not to use too much force....."

Layfon proposed this in a weak tone to Felli, who glared at him and then continued peeling. The peeler was such an easy-to-use tool, but Felli glared at the vegetables with an extremely impatient expression.

"Are you telling me to relax?"

"You can definitely relax."

"....."

Felli's hand that held the vegetables trembled, her face a bit troubled. Next to her, Layfon continued making his own food. The vegetables she was dealing with were going to be used for salad, so they could make it even if he peeled them after finishing his work.

But, what was Felli planning, suddenly saying that she wanted to learn to cook?

Maybe this the challenge Felli had spoken about, possibilities other than being a Psychokinesist. After thinking that, Layfon felt that he ought to do something too.

But even now, he still hadn't thought of what to actually do.

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"Then....."

On the other side of things, this was Claribel's room. It only got a bit cool here even at night, but it felt like the temperature indoors was abnormally low.

The reason was because of the gazes of extreme contempt that Claribel and Teresa were shooting out.

"Uuu....."

Shin, who was kneeling on the ground without even being forced to, groaned beneath the gazes of the two of them. Tony and Cody behind him had no clue what to do.

"Well, it's fine to be a fan."

Claribel murmured.

"It feels wrong, but there's no helping it. After all, that's a question of your individual preferences."

Teresa also nodded reluctantly.

"Maybe it's just an interest of yours."

"Yeah, even though it feels wrong!"

Teresa especially stressed that point.

"As long as you don't do anything illegal, no one can say anything about your interests. After all, there's no evidence you committed a crime, and my teacher said 'don't let guys hold it in for too long', so you might as well satisfy your urges."

"It feels wrong, though!"

Teresa kept stressing that point, her expression seeming to have accumulated a great deal of resentment.

"But I wish you could choose the right time and place."

"It would be nice if you choose the right partner too!"

Teresa was practically enraged.

Of course, this was because of Shin's shameful display from before.

At Nina's request, Felli had once helped the fourteenth platoon change their image. Shin had openly used the nicknames and outfits from that time - Felli had never ever thought he would actually use them - and had even made up the nickname 'Silver Angel' for Felli on his own. She had been quite angry about that, so she had interrogated Shin.

At the time, Shin had worn a raptured, intoxicated expression. The two of them were berating him for that.

"....."

Claribel put on an expression that suggested she still wanted to say things, but after opening her mouth and moving her gaze, she sighed deeply.

"Well, whatever. Even if the captain is a pervert, it doesn't change his power."

"It has to do with his humanity."

Teresa, who hadn't yet cooled off, continued scolding him. With every word, Shin's body seemed to shrink a bit.

"We..... We'll follow you, Captain!"

"You..... You guys....."

Tony and Cody quietly comforted Shin.

The three of them wept loudly, but then Teresa glared at them with a terrifying expression, so the three of them huddled together and trembled.

".....Let's return to the main topic."

Claribel coughed and drew in everyone's attention.

"But, Clara-chan!"

"Give it up. This platoon's captain and the person you love is a pervert."

"Uuu....."

Claribel consoled Teresa, who had fallen to the ground, as she looked at the males.

Shin couldn't even retort. Did he not have the energy, or had he already given up?

Maybe there wouldn't be any results from today.

Actually, she was a bit..... tired.

"Why don't we just go back."

After Claribel murmured this, Shin first showed an expression of surprise, then a relieved expression immediately emerged on his face. Though this reaction made Claribel feel irritated, she didn't feel that they could think of any good ideas if they continued.

"Let's go back."

Claribel declared that again, and then ended the meeting.

A large amount of food was placed on the dining table in Layfon's room.

Sitting around it were three people - Layfon, Felli, and Claribel.

"Why did they go back?"

"......Sorry."

Layfon's troubled smile made Claribel cringe. Layfon had made more food because the fourteenth platoon had been going to eat dinner with them. Moreover,

because Layfon had made extra food, the amount of food was so much that it even left the two Military Artists known for their appetites speechless.

"We'll have to finish off this food for breakfast tomorrow, and make it into bentos."

"Then please make some for me too."

"Yeah, I was planning to."

Layfon nodded readily. Rather than feeling sheepish[8], Claribel actually felt somewhat happy. Just then, Felli glanced at Layfon, maintaining silence.

"Felli, you want a bento too?"

"Is there none for me?"

"Huh? Th.....There is."

Though they were classified as Military Artists, Psychokinesists didn't eat that much, and Felli looked like a particularly light eater. Because of that, even Claribel could understand that answer, but Felli's unhappy tone flustered Layfon.

"Then please make some."

Felli ate silently again. Layfon put on a relieved expression, but Claribel didn't really pay attention to his reaction.

Had the two of them been a bit too close recently?

Was she just thinking too much? Claribel had only learned about Felli's existence after coming to Zuellni, and she didn't know about Felli's and Layfon's relationship. Nin and Meishen might be interested in Layfon, and Claribel had immediately realized their relationships, but she couldn't get a feel for Felli.

The only thing Claribel was sure of was that Felli held feelings for Layfon. When she heard that Shin had introduced his senpai to Layfon, Claribel had been worried that some physical relationship or other had happened, but Layfon was

incredibly dense, so she shouldn't have to worry about such a thing happening between him and Felli.....

(I can't be careless.)

She felt like Felli might be the one to end up with Layfon. Nina seemed to not realize her own feelings, and Meishen lost out due to her own personality, so she couldn't shorten the distance between them.

(No no no, I don't need to think about such things right now.)

Claribel mentally shook her head as her thoughts spun towards love again. Though that matter was very important, it was another matter, and there was a proper order to things. She had to become strong for her goals. There was no time to be confused, and if she were confused, she might end up not even being able to speak of love.

After thinking that way, her mood slowly worsened.

Even though it was another matter, the fact that Layfon was unaware that he was wall she wanted to surpass made Claribel feel angry.

She wanted to say it.

Though she wanted to, she didn't. Because she had decided this was the problem she should overcome. Also, if she told Layfon about it so readily, and it led to him wanting to help her and not want to fight her, then he would hold back even more when he fought her.

If she told him, it would be after she fought with him for real.

".....Hmm?"

Claribel planned on eating a bit more than usual to deal with the four extra portions of Layfon's food, but then she noticed that the salad tasted a bit different from usual. Claribel was very keen about taste, but tonight she had been blinded by the amount of food, so she hadn't paid that much attention to it.

Layfon's food was generally very good. If she tried paying attention to it, she could clearly notice the difference between the salad and the other food.

What was the difference? Though the dressing was the same as always, Claribel felt like it tasted different.

"Um..... This salad--"

"Ah, you noticed? Felli-senpai made that."

"Huh?"

Did you mess it up - Claribel hastily swallowed the words she was going to say, then looked at Felli.

Claribel remembered that Felli couldn't cook. No, although she had never heard Felli say that, Felli gave off that kind of feeling.

Also, her name never appeared in the list of people who were to cook.

To be fair, Claribel herself wasn't good enough to make food for others, so she didn't plan on criticizing Felli for that. People from Military Artist lineages like Claribel and Felli often had very wealthy family environments, so there were probably many who had never cooked before. Felli didn't seem to have come from a Military Artist family, but she gave off a wealthy, upper-class feeling, so it wasn't strange that she couldn't cook.

".....Sorry, I didn't make it well."

Felli apologized flatly, yet somewhat unhappily. Maybe she could also taste the difference, or perhaps it displeased her.

"No, it's fine."

Though she knew it was useless, Claribel could only reply that way. This wasn't her home, nor did she have a reason to belittle the cooking of others.

It would be another matter if it were inedible, but at least she could eat this salad.

"But Senpai, you've improved."

".....>Really?"

"Because it's edible."

"......It looks like you don't want to live anymore."

"Guah!"

Layfon fell from his chair with a crash. It seemed like his shin had been kicked. Layfon writhed in pain on the floor. It seemed to hurt very much.

"Uhm....."

Claribel mused to herself as she watched that scene.

This time, Claribel was the one to make tea after they finished eating. If it were just making tea, she was capable.

After placing the finished tea on a tray, Layfon said "Right....." as he took out snacks.

In that instant.....

"Hiyah!"

As Layfon was about to walk past, Claribel changed the hand she held the tray with and struck out at him.

"....."

Layfon wordlessly stopped, staring at Claribel's karate chop as it passed by in front of him.

That displeased Claribel greatly.

"Why did you dodge?"

"I would have died if I didn't dodge."

"But you took Felli-senpai's kick."

"Because that was a surprise attack."

"I did a surprise attack too, so please get hit."

"There would be a hold through my body if I did."

After speaking, Layfon looked up at his own bangs. Some of his hair had been cut off, and cut strands fluttered in midair. Layfon reached out to wave away the strands, keeping them from falling on the snacks.

"Hmph....."

How annoying. She had just put a bit of strength into that cute move, but Layfon had responded to it so mechanically. How annoying.

"I request a change in treatment."

After bringing the tea to the living room, Claribel brought up this request.

"What does that mean?"

Layfon put on a strange expression, while Felli raised an eyebrow.

"In other words, I want to say you treat me too rudely."

"I don't think that's true."

"No, you do!"

Claribel flatly rejected Layfon's statement.

"I feel like you're much ruder with me than you are with Felli-senpai or Meishen-san."

".....Captain isn't included in there?"

"She's very sturdy, so it's fine."

She also flatly rejected Felli's question.

"......Oh? Who are you calling sturdy?"

A voice coming from behind her made Claribel jump in surprise.

Standing behind her was Nina with a somewhat stiff expression, in a place she hadn't been previously.

"N......Nina-senpai? When did you come back?'

"Just now."

"I opened the door for her, didn't you see?"

In that case, Layfon had opened the door when he went to get the snacks just now? Claribel hadn't noticed her at all.

"I come back while practicing Sakkei. It looks like I surprised you, Clara."

"A......Ahahaha!"

Claribel tried smoothing over Nina's ice-cold tone with a laugh.

"Incidentally, Layfon noticed."

"Uu!"

Claribel hadn't noticed because Layfon's movements had been extremely natural when he went to open the door for Nina. But Layfon had been able to notice that in an ordinary state, but Claribel hadn't noticed in an ordinary state. That meant that there was a large power gap between the two of them, as expected.

(No no no, it's because I was focused on surprise-attacking Layfon, so I didn't notice.)

She tried convincing herself with that reason, but immediately noticed that it couldn't overturn the facts.

In other words, she had shown an opening.

"Well, that really shows you're rude to me."

"Why!?"

Claribel kept going after Layfon in order to pull them back to the topic and to avoid Nina's anger.

"It's because Nina used Sakkei when she came back but you still noticed her presence. And you avoided my surprise attack so easily, but didn't avoid Felli-senpai's kick. Why's that? As I thought, Layfon's really rude towards me and Nina. Right, Nina-senpai?"

"What!? Even I'm getting involved?"

Nina leaned back in surprise at this unexpected development.

"Because it's actually like that, right? You endured Felli-senpai's kick. Why was that?"

"Uh, Felli's a Psychokinesist, so her muscles are the same as an ordinary person's..... Right?"

"Nina said. But her voice became smaller and smaller, perhaps because she wasn't confident.

"Huh? What's wrong?"

Layfon also faltered under Nina's stare.

"Is that true?"

"Huh..... Uh, probably, yeah."

"What do you mean, 'probably'!?"

"Uwah!"

Nina's shout made the air vibrate, and Layfon instantly straightened himself.

"Felli's muscles are the same as an ordinary person's, so you held back. Is that right? Layfon!"

"Uh..... I'm not sure."

"What do you mean, 'you're not sure'?"

"It's true that I can't dodge Felli.....senpai's kick, but being able to detect Captain's presence, and dodging Clara's surprise attack were both, uh..... reflex, I didn't do them on purpose."

"Reflex, you say....."

"Uuu, sorry."

Layfon cringed as Nina glared fiercely at him. Good, that was the right feeling - Claribel mentally made a fist. Even if Layfon wasn't aware of it, Claribel couldn't treat Layfon like Nina did because of the relationship she had cultivated when they had been in Grendan.

Even if Layfon was stronger than Nina, the captain-subordinate relationship could make Layfon yield mentally to Nina.

Good, I'll use Nina to rout Layfon like this, and then I'll use everything I can to ready the battlefield.

"Then good!"

"Huuh?"

Those thoughts collapsed with a surprised sound after Nina's words.

"Wh.....Why?"

"He said it was reflex, right? There's no use in blaming him for that."

"But that's why it's serious!"

"But there's no use in fixing that problem."

"In that case, you think it doesn't matter, Nina-senpai?"

"Hmm? Well....."

Nina took up a thoughtful posture.

Claribel waited.

"....."

Nina was deep in thought. She put her hand on her chin and closed her eyes, making Claribel hopeful about turning the tables.

"....."

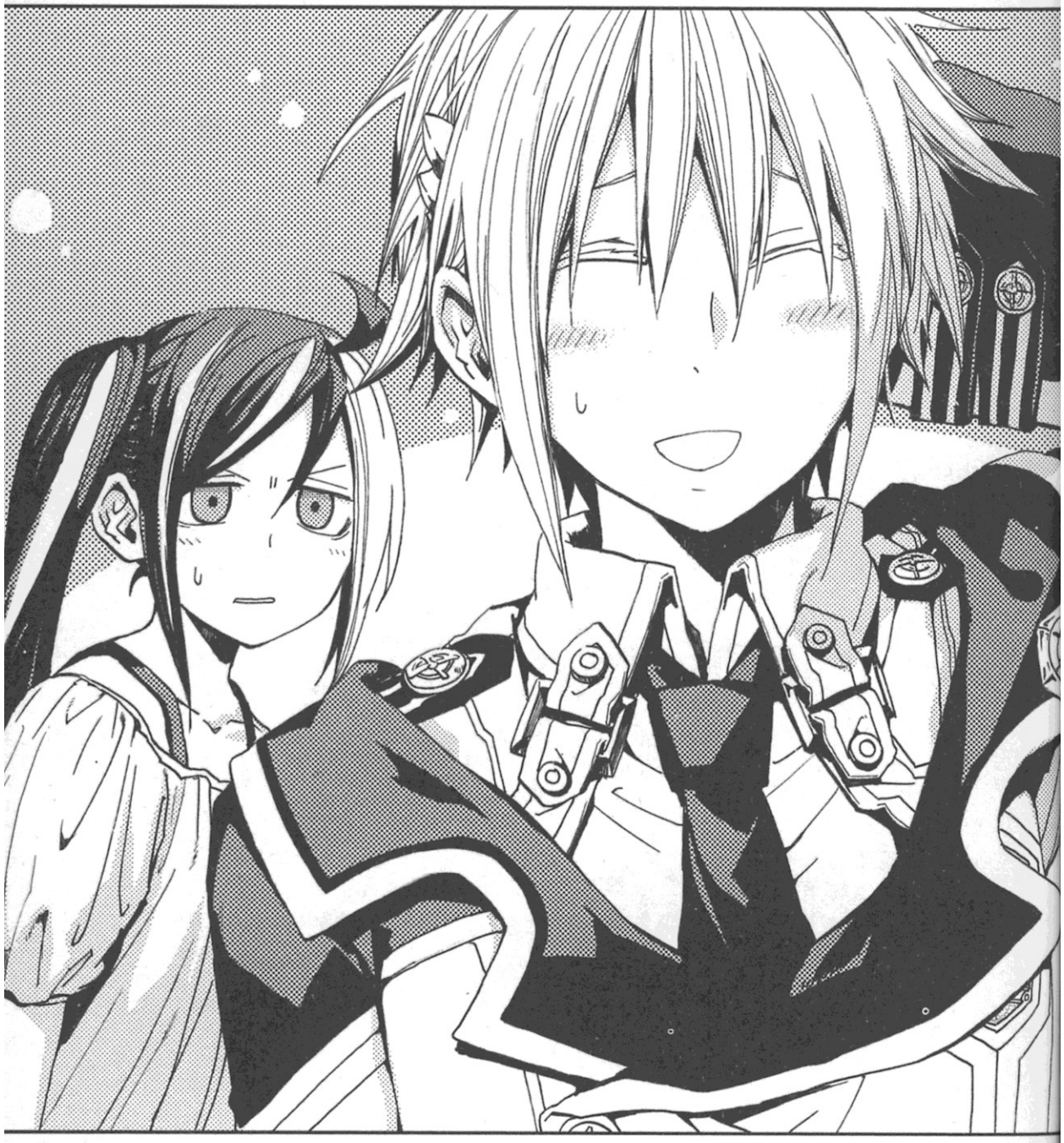
The silence continued.

".....Um, Nina-senpai?"

".....Captain, have you not eaten dinner?"

"Huh?"

"Oh my, I was so busy training that I forgot to eat."



After Layfon asked this, Nina shook her head sheepishly.

(So she was just pretending to think just now? She was actually so hungry she couldn't think at all?)

Stunned, Claribel stared at Nina, who wore an embarrassed smile.

"There's food left, I'll go warm it up for you."

"Sorry."

"Huh, wait..... Um, Nina-senpai?"

"What?"

"What about the matter we were talking about?"

"Hmm? Uhh....."

Claribel's question caused Nina to look up at the ceiling for a long while.

"Yeah, there's no helping it."

"Huh?"

"And it would be a pain for me if Layfon continued becoming loose."

"Hmm, uh..... Yeah, maybe."

"Also, it's enviable that he can do those things so naturally."

"Uh, uuu..... That's true."

Not good, she was completely in a Military Artist mindset. Though Claribel wasn't qualified to dismiss others for that, she still felt despaired.

"But as I thought, it's still....."

When she got that far, the smell of the reheated food wafted over to them.

"Uh....."

"Thanks for waiting."

"Ohh, thanks."

Nina walked to the dining table with a spring in her step, not a single piece of her demeanor during her talk with Claribel visible from behind her.

(How should I say it.....)

Claribel thought as she looked at Nina, who sat on the sofa quietly eating food, and Layfon, who was responsible for providing the food.

(Everyone's being tamed.)

She meant that Layfon was taming everyone using food, especially Nina. The dorm head Selina had been responsible for making food when she had lived in a dorm before. Her cooking definitely hadn't been bad, but unfortunately the portions had only been suited for ordinary people, so it had been a bit lacking for a Military Artist.

Layfon said that he would had been scolded when he made too much food before, but that was only because he cooked for ordinary people. If he cooked based on his own portions, it would be too much for ordinary people.

Layfon's food wasn't as good as Meishen's, at least from an eating standpoint - comparing things like taste, texture, or depth.

However, big eaters would prefer the food Layfon made. They didn't get tired of eating his food, though his portions were large.

Nina had been completely tamed by that food. Nina had been very engrossed in training recently, so it wouldn't be a lie to say she was always hungry. Layfon's food was shockingly effective there.

(Not good, I need to realize that I'm isolated.)

Nina, who self-trained excessively, had become a demon of appetite. As expected, would it be impossible to make her into an ally?

(Ah, but, I she can't be careless either.)

That referred to her strength as a Military Artist. Claribel had continuously helped Nina with her individual training since she came to Zuellni, but her strength was completely different from before. That didn't just refer to her mental strength, which was enough to control the Haikizoku. To efficiently use the strength the Haikizoku carried, she had to improve her own Kei flow and Kei pathways along with her body's fundamental abilities. Nina's Kei flow and Kei pathways, which were generally recognized as being very difficult to develop, had grown quite a bit, and her body's abilities had improved by leaps and bounds. Maybe that day's intense battle had seeded something inside her body.

Was she wasting her time running in place by focusing purely on Layfon like this?

(No way..... I'm training myself too!)

A competitive spirit towards Nina had grown in Claribel's mind, and she had also affirmed herself of this. Actually, Claribel was carrying out individual training, but she felt like she was progressing very slowly.

But that wasn't only since she had come to Zuellni; it had been that way in Grendan too.

Slow growth with limited progress; that matter always weighed heavily on Claribel's mind.

Claribel wanted to fight at full power against Layfon, who she had always viewed as her goal, in order to destroy that wall.

(Not good..... I feel so impatient.)

The sensation of impatience burning her whole body agonized Claribel.

She wanted to loudly yell 'I can't go on like this'. But she couldn't do that. Claribel was conscious of a silent pressure assaulting her back. The person that pressure originated from wasn't in this room. However, it wouldn't be surprising if she could hear all the conversations here. Claribel realized that she was that kind of entity.

She looked completely harmless, but actually she could easily eliminate Claribel and the others. She could easily crush the leisurely scene playing in front of her eyes.

Claribel and the others hadn't informed Layfon about her, so she probably had no reason to monitor him.

The reason Claribel had to become strong was also to oppose her.

.....However.

Layfon had made food for the hungry Nina with a laid-back expression. Seeing that scene, Claribel had naturally felt helpless. She couldn't help but think - what if she were just over-thinking things.

What if the situation wasn't actually that urgent. Maybe everything had been perfectly resolved back then in Grendan, and the world would continue on like it had always done.

What if she was actually harmless just like she looked, and everything was just her own misunderstanding..... Maybe things might be that way.

(That's too optimistic.)

Claribel immediately gave up on the thoughts that flitted through her mind. Of course she would be very happy if things could be that way, but reality wasn't that beautiful. Nothing could be resolved if she didn't do anything. Even if someone did something, it definitely wouldn't be for her benefit. Since it wouldn't be for her benefit, she couldn't expect what she wished for.

Only if she obtained victory with her own hands would what she obtained from it have meaning.

(I need to think of how to deal with her, or.....)

However, she couldn't think of any good ways.

As Claribel troubled over this, she spotted Felli's figure in the corner of her vision.

(Would she have any good methods?)

Claribel had always felt Felli hard to approach and had avoided her until now, but she was the person closes to Layfon at the moment. Maybe she knew a way that Claribel couldn't think of.

"Felli-senpai, Felli-senpai."

".....What is it?"

Felli looked over with a suspicious gaze. Claribel asked in a voice that she made as cheerful yet surreptitious as possible:

"Is there anything that could make Layfon be serious?"

".....That again?"

Felli's expression changed as if she were enduring a headache.

"Felli-senpai, you thought of Lay the Flash too, right?"

".....So you really heard us talking back then."

That was referring to what happened during the battle for Claribel[9].

"Because the competition was very boring."

After deciding to join the fourteenth platoon, Claribel had immediately declared war against Layfon. However, she had used the name 'Lay the Flash' at that time.

It was a nickname for Layfon that Felli had made as a joke, and she had never called him that afterwards. Claribel knew that name because she had secretly listened to the conversation between Layfon and the others in the spectator seats.

"I came to Zuellni because I want to fight against him for real. Please lend me your wisdom."

"Why do I....."

"Silver Angel."

When Claribel murmured this, Felli's body shuddered.

"We'll call Felli-senpai that when we fight the seventeenth platoon."

"You..... You really are....."

"I won't hesitate to get anyone involved to accomplish my goals."

"Ugh....."

After reading the hesitation that Felli didn't reveal, Claribel smiled slightly.

"So please help me."

"I don't know about that."

"Then should I just kidnap you?"

".....Hah?"

"Something like 'Hahahaha, tonight Felli Loss will be reborn as the Silver Angel!', to make Layfon say a heated line like 'Don't even think about it!'. That's the weakness of a female protagonist, right?"

"Didn't I say not to call me that?"

"Then we'll make the setting so you're not the Silver Angel anymore."

"Please don't talk about settings, alright?"

"Okay....."

Noticing that she was talking like Shin, Claribel shut her mouth.

But no matter how she immersed herself in that world, she really couldn't see the black-clothed Princess of Darkness as her real self. That meant she was able to grasp that much common sense.

She also noticed that on some level, it was just an act.

In that case, it would be a shame not to have fun with it.

The excitement from the act offsetting the pressure of reality definitely had meaning to Claribel.

"How is it? Do you want to be a captured princess?"

"No, I've already experienced it, so I really don't want to do that on purpose."

"Huh?"

Though Claribel didn't know, Felli had once been taken hostage during the battle against the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang.

"My conscience won't permit me to do that again."

"Even if it's an act?"

"Even if it's an act."

"Ugh....."

She could feel from Felli's words that it was meaningless to pressure her to do it again, so Claribel immediately changed strategies.

"Then what do you think will make Layfon fight seriously, Senpai?"

"Well..... He would fight seriously for anyone."

Felli came to that conclusion after thinking for a while.

"Huh?"

"It doesn't have to be me, even you or the Captain would work too."

"R.....Really?"

"Yeah. Even his classmate - uh..... I forgot his name, that fat guy, or even Sharnid, I think Layfon would fight seriously for."

'Even you'. That part made Claribel a bit happy, but the following words made that feeling crumble.

"You mean anyone would do?"

"As long as he knows them and he thinks it's necessary."

Claribel groaned after Felli simply and concisely asserted this. It was certainly possible for things to have turned out like this if he were such a Good Samaritan.

".....Meaning it would be fine if I were the one kidnapped?"

"Wouldn't that be good?"

".....Why do I have to sacrifice myself?"

"Because I'm already weary of those things."

"R.....Really?"

"It just gets worse and worse."

Felli let out a long, deep sigh, and Claribel inadvertently felt that there were some forbidden reasons there that she shouldn't touch.

"A.....Anyways, that plan is worth a try."

"......Do you really think so?"

"Huh? Felli-senpai, weren't you the one who said it could work?'

"I'm not sure if your acting will succeed."

"But, there's no one here who can actually kidnap me."

"That would be completely unrealistic."

"Please wait, my thinking brain is starting to spin wildly."

"Thinking brain?"

"A captured female protagonist - that will be the key to make him serious, and then I'll fight with him and get a happy ending. That's the kind of story I'll create."

"You might be thinking too optimistically."

Her tone was clearly mixed with emotions of resignation, but Claribel just continued thinking, unconcerned with her response. Layfon was continuously pushing Nina towards a boundless appetite, so she had to separate Nina from Layfon and then pull Layfon, who recently had slowly been becoming a master of the house, back to the path of Military Arts. That was the goal of the plan, which was also the strategy to let Claribel surpass Layfon and advance on the road to glory. Claribel would complete it.

"Got it."

"Got it?"

"Yeah. Felli-senpai, I want to use your Psychokinesis to contact someone."

Claribel made that request after pulling the dubious Felli somewhere else. After saying the name of that someone, Felli put on a blatant expression of loathing.

"Uwah!"

After the flake carried over that person's cry of surprise, Claribel immediately gave that person instructions. That person became even more confused, but Claribel announced the strategy they were going to carry out, ignoring Felli's look as it became colder and colder.

◇

"Thanks for the food!"

"It wasn't much."

Satisfied, Nina put her hands together, while Layfon smiled naturally. Nina had pretty much eaten all the food he thought he had made too much of, so he would be able to clear off the rest of the food by making it into breakfast or bentos.

"I'll wash the dishes. Layfon, you go take a break."

"Huh? No, it's alright."

"It's not good for me to just eat."

"Captain, you paid for the ingredients too."

"But I didn't put in any work."

"Uh, that's true, but....."

".....Don't worry, I washed dishes when I lived in the dorm."

"Really? Then....."

"As I thought, you were worried about the dishes."

"A-Ahahahaha....."

After brushing over Nina's glare with a smile, Layfon decided to wipe the table.

"....."

Just then, Nina walked back with a hard-to-describe expression.

"Huh? Felli-senpai, where's Clara?"

"I don't know."

"Huh? But you just left with her....."

"I didn't."

Though Layfon had been making food for Nina, he had still picked up on everything happening in the room. He knew that Claribel had said something to Felli, and then the two of them had moved to the hallway.

Layfon only heard the sound of a door closing. In that case, did it mean Claribel had gone back?

"She should have at least said something."

Nina muttered. Layfon returned a "yeah", but felt that something was amiss. However, he didn't deliberately up his senses to try searching for Claribel's footsteps. Had she gone to do individual training, or had she returned to her room? Though it was rare for her to leave without saying anything, it wouldn't be strange for her to go back to her room at this time.

Just as Layfon was thinking this, he picked up a suspicious movement from outside.

"Hmm?"

It was the presence of someone moving strangely.

The presence slipped around to the building's wall near the balcony, then jumped up.

A thief? And a Military Artist?

"Huh, Felli-senpai, why did you open the balcony window?"

"......Because it would be troublesome if it got broken."

"Huh?"

Felli left after unlocking the window. She didn't walk into the balcony, she just unlocked the window and left. Layfon didn't understand why she was doing that, but the presence landed on the balcony after leaping up.

There was one presence..... No, two.

There was one more who was using stronger Sakkei.

Enemies.

That word flashed through Layfon's mind.

But he couldn't feel any hostility.

So were they not enemies?

Then what were they?

.....As Layfon thought this, the person outside opened the window Felli had unlocked with great force.

"Aha~hahahahahahaha!"

The laugh that entered the room put Layfon at a loss for words.

"W.....What?"

Nina made a confused sound from where she was washing dishes.

"....."

Felli, who had moved to a corner of the living room before things happened, sighed.

"You..... What....."

Without the calmness that came from understanding the situation, Layfon had no choice but to face the facts before him without hesitating.

".....Are you doing?"

Layfon puzzled over what to say as he asked.

"This is a declaration of war....."

The man balanced himself on the rail of the balcony as he spoke, the hem of his black clothes blending into the colors of the night.

"Lay the Flash!"

The man - that's right, Shin the Falcon - pointed at Layfon as if to hide his somewhat embarrassed expression.

"Uh, hey..... Could you not call me that?"

"Heheheh..... Is now the time to say such things?"

"Huh?"

An expression of embarrassment that Shin couldn't blot out spread to his cheeks as he let out an intentional laugh.

"Heheheh..... In that case, how about this!"

Shin fluttered his coat, and there was.....

"Clara?"

Claribel, wearing her Princess of Darkness outfit. However, she wore a downcast expression, and there was no longer any trace of her normally self-confident smile.

"Um..... What are you doing?"

Layfon didn't understand what Claribel and Shin were doing. Nina didn't say anything from behind him, and a sense of resignation radiated from Felli.

Layfon along fell into confusion.

"Layfon..... No, Lay the Flash."

"Do you have to use that nickname?"

Layfon was more concerned about that problem than Claribel's weak tone.

"Lay the Flash..... I'm being controlled."

"Huuh?"

The sudden statement surprised Layfon. He was more surprised due to not understanding why Claribel would say something like that than surprised at the part about 'being controlled'.

"Huh? But Clara, didn't you wear that yourself....."

"Right. But actually, there's a curse placed on these clothes. A curse forcing me to defeat the apostle of light - you."

"A curse, you said?"

"Apostle of light?"

Layfon and Nina behind him spoke simultaneously.

"Hold on, you said apostle of light..... Please stop this, alright? Somehow, my chest hurts a lot."

Also, hadn't Shin over there been the one who prepared those clothes? What curse could there be; there was nothing that terrifying on them at all.

"Also, didn't Shin-senpai say that the measurements hadn't been adjusted yet during the competition? It must be new."

Just like how Claribel had heard the conversation between Layfon and the others, Layfon had also heard Claribel and the others talking. If he wanted to, he could strengthen his senses without using much Kei.

"New clothes doesn't mean the curse is gone!"

After shouting somewhat impatiently, Claribel suddenly came to her senses and continued faking a pallid appearance.

"Yes - the curse binds my body."

"Weren't you pretty spirited just now?"

Layfon rebutted with this, his voice seeming very listless.

"I can still resist the strength of this curse. But how long can I hold on? If this goes on, I'll be affected by the curse and become a true Princess of Darkness."

"Really....."

"Lay the Flash. Before that, cleanse my curse with your power of light."

"Uh, I'm not an apostle of light, nor do I have that kind of special power."

"Aah..... the curse....."

Claribel didn't listen to him, making her body sway left and right. However, she was standing on the balcony handrail with Shin, so that action wasn't really convincing.

"Ahahaha, what will you do, Lay the Flash!?"

"Uh, even if you ask me what I'll do....."

Being asked this gave Layfon a headache.

Claribel wanted to fight with Layfon. She wanted a true battle, not practice. Layfon had been depressed previously and hadn't been able to give it his all, but now he had already recovered and he himself realized that too.

He even felt that it might be fine to fight with Claribel.

But.....

Layfon thought. This matter was no longer related to his depression, and Layfon didn't believe there was any problem with fighting her outside of the noise reason he had told Claribel about before. There were pretty much no problems with a battle excepting whether Layfon would be able to fight 'for real' like Claribel hoped. As for that point, he could very calmly grasp could his physical and mental states during battle. That ability of Layfon's was completely unrelated to his mental angst, and it could even be called something like a mechanical function.

He could fight. He could use his full strength. To quantify his current strength, Layfon was capable of putting forth an average strength - though it was unclear whether he could use his highest strength value. Moreover, he believed that it was this average strength value that was important.

A level of strength the he could use no matter what the situation was. That was the important value to Layfon.

So, well, he didn't mind fighting. Never mind whether he was the 'Layfon Wolfstein Alseif' that Claribel recognized, but he was no longer that opposed to fighting.

But.....

"As I thought, 'Lay the Flash' is still a bit....."

Layfon imagined. If there were a fight in Zuellni for no particular reason, the stage would be a practice battlefield, and it would happen in the form of a platoon match. With that, there would be a large group of spectators watching the battle. Layfon didn't mind that. He had fought under those circumstances up till now, even in Grendan. Layfon didn't oppose fighting while being watched by others.

But.....

The fourteenth platoon - the Three Jet-Black Stars, and Shin the Falcon, and the Princess of Darkness Clara.

And their enemy - Lay the Flash of the seventeenth platoon.

Layfon could vaguely realize. This was a true Military Artist's fight - though they were holding weapons with safety equipment - with dramatic elements added on.

That wasn't too bad, nor did Layfon hate doing that. As long as the fight didn't become an act that was planned beforehand, Layfon was indifferent about its external appearance.

Layfon knew that there were other Military Artists who would fire up the audience's emotions during a competition. In particular, Troyatte of the Heaven's Blades excited the audience a lot, and would deliberately use certain techniques for their beauty.

Layfon recognized that there were such ways of fighting. In any case, it was a way to make the battlefield into a fighting environment suited to oneself. Layfon thought that people who mixed in dramatic elements enjoyed that kind of feeling and that they believed cheers of the audience would improve their mental state.

But in the end, that was only the situation when he was a third party. It didn't matter if his competition opponents did that, as long as they didn't pull Layfon into their acting setting.

"Hmm, I really can't accept Lay the Flash."

It was definitely not allowed for Layfon to become a player and get placed into the act.

Layfon tried imagining. The broadcasters enthusiastically explaining the battle scenario to the spectators. Claribel was affected by the Princess of Darkness's curse, and the apostle of light - Lay the Flash - had come forward to save her from that curse! Stopping him were the Three Jet-Black Stars, along with Shin the Falcon who commanded them!

Yeah, he couldn't do it.

He definitely couldn't do it!

Layfon mentally confirmed that several times. The conclusion didn't change. Impossible, impossible, he couldn't do it.

"Come, Lay the Flash. Let us fight brilliantly....."

"Uh, that's impossible."

Claribel excitedly drew her Dite. In contrast, Layfon was disinterested to the max. There was nothing exciting about this matter. Layfon wasn't too keen about playing hero games, nor did he have the kind of personality to do those things in front of an audience.

However.....

"Not bad!"

A person who approved of these things showed up in an unexpected place.

"Huuh!?"

Layfon turned around, but all he saw was Nina with her eyes sparkling for some reason. Bubbles spilled from the sponge she gripped in her hands.

"A hero coming forth to face evil, that's pretty cool!"

"Why!?"

Layfon groaned at how Nina had suddenly become excited. Where had the person who had previously wept about Shin's costume gone? He couldn't help but want to ask.

"I was always wondering about this, but Captain, do you perhaps enjoy hero movies?"

"Yeah! I've always wanted to show myself off like that!"

Nina nodded enthusiastically after Felli asked.

"I see."

Felli nodded after seeing that.

"Um, what's going on here?'

"......In other words, seeing her senpai bringing theatrics into a Military Arts competition made the captain sad. However, after realizing that her senpai still viewed the act of fighting sincerely, she corrected her way of thinking. And she herself - that is, standing on the 'side of justice' in the seventeenth platoon with Layfon - seems to have flipped her switch."

"......Give me a break."

"Why don't you say that to the captain?

Felli's attitude was very cold. No, maybe she had already given up.

But as someone involved, Layfon couldn't give up so easily.

"Ahahahaha, Nina! No..... Nina of the Amethyst Lightning! Do you believe that the platoon you command can win against me?"

"What nonsense! I have my comrades! We definitely won't let you do as you please!"

"Hahahahaha! Don't think you can lift the Princess of Darkness's curse so easily!"

Nina swung the arm that gripped the sponge as if to sweep away Shin the Falcon's evil. The bubbles scattered everywhere.

Nina had taken the bait, so Shin and Claribel took the opportunity to focus their efforts on her.

"I'll definitely break the Princess of Darkness's curse and rescue Clara!"

"Uh, hold on....."

"It's decided that the platoon will move out."

Felli's tone was flat, but her murmur added to the atmosphere of helplessness.

"I don't want this!"

Layfon groaned, but it didn't reach anyone.

"I'll definitely save Clara!"

"Ahahaha! I'm looking forward to the showdown."

Layfon's words withered to nothing before Nina's sparkling eyes.

Mental Conferences Should be Held in Secret

Clara A said:

"What's important is sorting out the problem first."

"Really? Is that problem difficult enough to need sorting out?"

Clara B refuted Clara A's opinion.

"It's true that the problem's very difficult. But I also think there's no need to deal with it."

Clara C calmly critiqued.

"It's very important to sort out the problem. But I doubt whether doing that can resolve anything."

Clara D pointed out.

"Speaking of sorting out, this room's very clean. So different from her room."

"You're basically someone who leaves everything for other people to do."

Clara E and F debated over such things.

"Here's what's important! I haven't even eaten Meishen's delicious cooking! Or Layfon's supersized portions of food! I want to satisfy both desires!"

"The desire to recuperate physical strength is quite important for a Military Artist, but what about for a woman?"

Clara H consoled Clara G as she emphasized this.

Chatter, chatter.

Chatter, chatter.

A large number of Claras surrounded the circular table and talked like this.

This was the inside of Clara's mind.

It was a meeting room with a circular table.

Right now, Claribel Ronsmier was facing an important topic and was struggling with it.

This was a visual portrayal of her mind.

◇

Before her mental conference was held.

Clara felt refreshed that night.

She had fought against Layfon in the platoon match, and challenged him to fight alone.

It had been a true one-on-one battle.

She, who hadn't hesitated to chase him to Zuellni, had achieved her goal.

Though problems had piled up like a mountain, her mood was very cheerful tonight.

No, it 'had' been very cheerful.

Past tense.

Clara..... Claribel Ronsmier.

She was a member of one of the three royal families that supported Grendan, and if she hadn't left home for Zuellni, her grandfather would have pestered her to become the Ronsmier family head. After twenty or thirty years, she might have become Grendan's queen.

That was the person Claribel Ronsmier.

However, her mood wasn't downcast because she was only now regretting losing her privilege to inherit the throne.

You could even say that she had never once held interest in the throne up through now. Maybe it was her personality as a member of the three royal families, as the more excellent of a Military Artist she was, the more indifferent she was about the royal families.

"Hah....."

Halfway through the celebration-and-consolation party that had been held in the apartment, Claribel snuck into the bathroom and then sighed with a gloomy heart.

Just sighing couldn't lighten her mood.

Meishen and her friends had made countless foods, and they were all extremely delicious. It had been a happy, short time.

Since this celebration party was simultaneously a consolation party, the fourteenth platoon that Claribel belonged to were here as well as Layfon, Nina, and the seventeenth platoon. Meishen's friends and residents of this apartment were here too, so the place was quite lively.

"What am I doing?"

Claribel listened to the laughs of the Shin and the fourteenth platoon from the other side of the wall as she murmured.

She had hidden in the bathroom because she hated pretending to smile.

But she couldn't stay here too long. If everyone worried, doing this would have been meaningless.

".....Guess I'll go back."

Claiming that she felt very tired after the competition was probably the most convincing. Claribel and Layfon had fought an incredibly intense battle, so everyone definitely could accept that.

Actually, the feeling of battle still lingered in Claribel's body, so she didn't want to sleep at all. But no one knew that.

"Guess that's what I'll do."

After telling herself to stand by her thinking, Claribel tried rising.....

She tried doing that, but she couldn't.

She wanted to leave this place.

"Ng--"

The thought 'but is there anything else to do with him?' floated in her heart.

Though it was completely unfounded, that feeling tightly lodged itself in a corner of Clara's heart, interfering with her decision to return home.

Normally, she would view that kind of feeling as simple unwillingness to part with normalcy, but.....

"What's wrong with me?"

Something was different.

The reason for the difference was in her pocket.

"Urgh--"

How annoying.

The object she took out was a small bottle as large as her pinky.

She had met a suspicious person.

Claribel had heard Nina say it several times, saying that person was a troublemaker who used her abilities to have fun.

Claribel felt that this person was probably a researcher or something. As she had thought, this woman was apparently a drug researcher.

However, that wasn't what interested her about this woman.

After hearing of that incident from Nina, she had just ended the topic with an 'Oh!'.

'Such a person exists' - then she ended the topic.

However, that person was the dorm head of the dorm Nina had lived at before, and Claribel had been taken care of by that person for a short period of time once before moving to this apartment.

That person was Selina.

She's very suspicious, so you have to be careful - Nina warned Claribel like that countless times.

So Claribel had never thought of using the thing she had given her.

"It's just this....."

Claribel looked at the bottle she pinched with her fingers.

She had received the medicine bottle before moving here.

The problem was.....

"Why did I bring this here?"

That matter.

A drug given by a suspicious person.

A drug used in suspicious situations.

Why had she brought it here tonight?

'This drug was made according to research into filth monster biology.'

Claribel remembered that Selina had described this medicine bottle that way.

She thought of the situation from that time.

"This drug works on the nervous system, but for a large part of filth monsters' nerves it's hard to say whether they're biological or not, so it's really difficult."

"Really?"

Maybe she had been affected by Selina's somewhat slow way of speaking, as Claribel also looked at the medicine bottle in her palm with leisurely movements. It looked more like a toy perfume bottle she had gotten as a child than a medicine bottle.

"In other words, this is poison?"

"Hmm~ it would be nice if we were able to make something so effective. It would be convenient if we could invent a repellent."

The word 'repellent' made a picture of bug spray appear in Clara's mind. You can easily drive away filth monsters with a spray! .....If that kind of future existed, what use would Military Artists be?

"The drug we made this time is used on the nervous system, to make the filth monster's movements slow down..... Well, it's something of that level."

"Oh....."

"Incidentally, if you dilute it a hundred times, it'll become sleeping medicine."

".....Hah?"

"If you dilute it seventy times, it'll be effective on Military Artists."

"Hah?"

"Very interesting, right?"

Selina narrowed her eyes very thin, smiling at Clara's stunned expression.

After recalling that incident, Clara stared at the bottle.

"Truly a suspicious person."

That pair of eyes had been seeing through Clara.

Clara currently had that kind of feeling.

What would happen if she gave this medicine bottle to Clara? Selina had given n that drug to Clara because she had seen that outcome.

This person was suspicious, and also very interesting.

Clara hadn't told Selina the reason she came to this city. Though Clara believed this, Selina had still given this medicine bottle to her, so that meant Selina was incredibly outstanding at reading people.

"As I thought, this means..... now is the time to use it?"

She pinched the medicine bottle between her fingers, feeling like the solid sensation slipping between her fingertips was telling her the answer.....

"No no no..... I can't do that."

She couldn't help but mutter.

Just then, a doorknock sounded.

"Ah, what is it?"

"Clara? Are you okay?"

"Ah~ .....Hahaha, I'm fine."

"Really? Sorry, then."

"No, it's alright."

"Nn."

Nina was the owner of the voice.

"Whew....."

Clara sighed lightly after she sensed her leaving.

".....Eh, what exactly am I doing?"

Shouldn't she hurry up and get out?

If she left this place, she could either talk with others or say that she was tired and was going to return to rest in her room. In any case, she should move.

She could just throw the drug away here.

Dump it and flush it down, then it would be over.

That was all she had to do, so why couldn't she do it?

"Uaaaaah!"

Clara held her head.

She didn't know what she wanted to do either.

◇

Hence, this mental conference.

"Everyone, quiet down!"

Clara A forcefully pounded the round table at the constantly-chattering Claras.

"Doesn't everyone want to resolve this problem?"

Clara A asked impatiently.

They were just being noisy. It didn't feel like they wanted to solve the problem at all to her.

"Huh~"

"That's fine, I guess?"

"Actually, that's the question, right?"

"It's a problem that she can't get out of the bathroom."

"She'll just be shut inside someone else's bathroom like this."

"Wouldn't it be good to just leave the bathroom first?"

"We're going to graduate from the bathroom (heh[10])."

"We're having this meeting because she can't graduate!"

Clara A continued forcefully pounding the table.

"Everyone, what do you think we should do to leave the bathroom?"

"Just squeeze it out, right?"

"Squeeze what?"

"It feels impolite to talk about something like that here."

"Well, the meaning is to have her finish her business in the bathroom."

"Ahh, that's not a bad way to describe it."

"Then we'll say that."

"All she needs to do is put some effort into her lower abdomen."

"You should all know that this way is better for the body!"

Clara A was the only one shouting.

In her opinion, the topic she had brought about was moving in a grave direction.

"Is it like this now?"

Clara A glared and surveyed the Claras in the mind.

"Are you unwilling to resolve the current problem?"

"Huh~?"

"Isn't there no helping it?"

"Yeah, because there's no saving her."

"You guys....."

Clara A held her head.

Why was it that all the Claras in the mind outside of her had no motivation?

"Hm~?"

In other words, Claribel herself had pretty much given up already?"

No, she was just unable to leave the bathroom after giving up hope, so that way of thinking wasn't correct.

"In that case, what do you plan on doing?"

Clara A asked them.

"Huh~?"

"Who knows~?"

"Staying in the bathroom like this isn't bad."

"Hmm."

"Someone will break in sooner or later."

"That would be unsightly."

"......If you know that, then think a little more seriously."

Their responses made Clara A feel very helpless.

It looked like of these mental Claras, only Clara A represented the will to resolve the problem. The others acted sluggishly because their determination was hazy.

In other words, Claribel herself was confused and unable to act.

"This can't go on!"

Clara A shouted this, making a proposal to her unmotivated compatriots.

Claribel herself couldn't move, so they had to organize her messy thoughts and then find what she truly wanted to do.

Only Clara A could do this.

"I'll just have to do my best."

After resolving herself again, Clara A stared at the Claras inside the mind.

Including herself, they were all illusions of imitation humans manifested from various thoughts in Clara's heart. Given that almost all of them showed no determination, Claribel herself couldn't take action either.

In that case, what could Clara A do now?

"I need to increase my support as much as possible."

But how could she attain her goal?

"How annoying."

Clara A had the determination to resolve the problem.

But Clara A's thinking ability was insufficient to think up how the problem could be resolved.

If her support increased, it would mean the thoughts of Claribel herself tended towards Clara A's side, so that way she would definitely be able to find a way to resolve things.

"I guess I symbolize the 'firm determination not to yield no matter what happens'."

After she realized that matter on her own, Clara A looked at her compatriots again.

Then, what should she do to turn them into allies?

In the end, she would have to solve that problem herself.

After thinking for a long while, Clara A said:

"Everyone, we definitely can't let her get trapped in someone else's bathroom."

"I guess."

"Yeah."

"But."

"There are still possibilities."

"Why's that?"

"In this world, this kind of happiness comes and goes."

"I see the world in a new light."

"I see."

"No no no no....."

Their thoughts tried to turn towards a different direction again, or rather, they tried to go in a direction completely opposite of what she wanted.

Clara A hastily stopped the progression of the topic.

"Are you all alright with letting Layfon see this scene?"

"Well....."

"That's a bit....."

"That's too much."

It seemed that she had succeeded in turning the tables. Clara A sighed in relief.

Just then, Clara A felt guidance from above flash through her mind.

"Right, Layfon!"

Clara A loudly proclaimed what she had realized.

"What?"

"Layfon?"

"Speaking of Layfon, today's battle wasn't bad."

"Though she lost."

"It was pretty refreshing."

"She always wanted to fight like that."

"A happy time."

Spurred on by Clara A, the mental Claras put on captivated demeanors.

As expected. Clara A confirmed that matter.

The mental Claras were unable to maintain chaotic attitudes when faced with Layfon. Because Clara A was the same.

"In that case, should we leave this place? This is also to avoid Layfon getting a 'bathroom girl' impression about Claribel."

"That's true."

"You're right."

"When you say it like that....."

"But are you sure he doesn't like 'bathroom girls'?"

"Haven't you been a bit too dismissive recently?"

"That's not true."

"I motion to vote here!'

Clara shouted.

"No matter what, we should leave the bathroom immediately! This is also to keep Layfon from making a 'bathroom girl' impression. Everyone in favor, raise your hands!"

An unstable undercurrent was concealed here. As if pushed to action by that sense of emergency, Clara A immediately made a proposal to the other mental Claras.

"As I thought....."

"'Bathroom girl' is a bit....."

The mental Claras raised their hands one by one to approve of Clara A's proposal.

Clara A let out a relieved breath just as the votes of approval broke half.

"Then let's leave the bathroom."

"Okay~"

The united opinion reached Claribel herself directly.

"Okay."

Her voice was also broadcasted inside her mind, and the 'Claribel's subjective point of view' screen that had been constantly showing the bathroom wall moved.

In the screen, Claribel stood up and prepared to reach for the door handle.

Just then--

"Please wait."

The one who said this was the one who had been continuously sparking discussion before.

"Why? Clara H?"

Clara A secretly raised her alertness as she asked.

"It's fine to leave the bathroom, but what do we do afterwards?"

"That....."

"Are we going home? Or are we using that medicine bottle? If we're going to use it, what do we do after using it?"

"Urghhh....."

The deluge of problems left Clara A silent.

"Won't ignoring the fundamental reasons she's hiding in the bathroom end up badly?"

"W.....Well, that's true....."

A commotion rose in the conference area.

"That's true."

"There's no hope if we don't decide what to do."

"Hm~"

"What do we do?"

The mental Claras around Clara A started becoming panicked.

"In that case....."

The impatient Clara A looked at the screen. As expected, Claribel's movements had also stopped.

"It's true that the nickname 'bathroom girl' is disgraceful, but we can't keep ignoring that problem. Our original self - Claribel Ronsmier - would never procrastinate, right?"

"Ugh....."

Clara A was completely unable to refute Clara H's matter-of-fact argument.

Very accurate.

Truly very accurate.

Just as she said, Claribel Ronsmier was that kind of person.

Once she wanted to do something and noticed a path to realize her goals, Claribel would charge forward without looking back. She was that kind of person.

That was why she had left her home in Grendan and come to Zuellni.

"In that case..... What do you plan on doing? What's right?"

Clara A spoke those words, having nowhere to turn.

Letting Clara H talk was very dangerous.

She had that kind of premonition, but Clara A still said what she did.

"The crux of the problem is the drug."

Clara H smoothly asserted.

"The crux of the problem is that she's indecisive due to the existence of the drug."

"That's true."

"Yeah."

"Then, why are we being indecisive?"

"Who knows?"

"Why is it?"

"Come to think of it, why's that?"

"Urghh."

The mental Claras spoke one by one. Clara A groaned, but inadvertently started thinking.

She didn't know the answer either.

But she felt like it was very difficult to give up on this medicine bottle.

It seemed some kind of future was inside this medicine bottle.

"D.....Do you mean you know the answer?"

"Of course!"

Clara H asserted this. Her figure made Clara A stare unconsciously in fascination.

Why was Clara H so full of self-confidence?

Clara A was the only one with the mission 'absolutely resolve the problem no matter what'.

"It's to use this drug and challenge Layfon a final time!"

Clara H cried out, clenching a fist.

But for some reason, her thumb was sticking out between her index and middle fingers.[11]

Moreover, all of the mental Claras could obviously understand what that meant. Though they symbolized various thoughts here, they were all Claribel in the end.

Because they possessed similar knowledge.

"That's going too far!"

Clara K expressed her refusal, her face red.

"H-H-H-H-H.....How could we do that kind of thing!"

"Why? A sleeping drug, Layfon, feeling depressed even though she realized the fight of her dreams..... Considering all those factors, this is the only answer you can come up with."

"How....."

"After the battle between Military Artists ends, next is the battle between men and women!"

The reactions of the other mental Claras had varied differences compared to Clara H's passionate speech.

Some were red-faced like Clara K, and some showed excited expressions. Come to think of it, there were also some calmly looking at the two sides bicker.

Though there were also other subtle differences, most reactions could be separated into those three types.

"In other words, approval, opposition, and neutrality.

And..... as for Clara A--

"Ah, I see."

She was very impressed.

To her, the current problem was how to overcome this difficulty. At this critical junction, it didn't matter what kind of means she used to reach her goal.

After all, Clara only had the determination to 'absolutely resolve this problem no matter what'.

"Since we can't give it up, then let's just use it. If we're going to use it, let's make it effective."

Clara A loudly approved of Clara H's opinion.

"How about it, everyone?"

Then, she asked her compatriots this.

"I hereby announce that, right now, the 'final showdown between man and woman' officially begins!"

In that instant, details of the battle plan were conveyed to the hearts of her other compatriots.

After all, they were all the same person.

◇

After the chattering and pondering.....

"Urrghhh....."

Clara finally opened the door.

"Yo, Clara. Where are you going after covering yourself in the fragrant aroma of the bathroom?"

"Uuu!"

Clara almost cried upon being immediately teased by Shin's cheerful tone.

"It's a joke. Are you alright?"

"I..... I'm alright!"

"Well, I thought you'd either be crying, or your stomach was really hurting."

"Hah?"

"Since you're not crying, your stomach must be hurting. You at too much, huh."

"Wha..... I didn't!"

Shin smiled as he left, with Clara huffily shouting at him.

"And what do you mean, crying....."

Clara muttered as she looked around.

The noisiness from the beginning had already diminished significantly, and right now a moderated atmosphere perfused the area. The groups of people here included Nina's seventeenth platoon members and Shin's fourteenth platoon members, as well as Meishen and her friends, and one other person - a resident of this apartment.

None of them had left.

Everyone was happily talking with those they were close with.

Nina met Clara's gaze and sent her a worried look. After waving at Nina with a smile, Nina showed a relieved expression.

The hand she waved at Nina with was covered in sweat.

(Um.....)

Clara murmured to herself.

(Where's Layfon.....)

This place was much larger than the average Zuellni apartment, but it wasn't too large, so it still felt very cramped when so many people congregated here.

Clara immediately found Layfon.

He was talking with his platoon's Dite technician.

His name was.....

(Huh?)

"Uh....."

What the heck, she couldn't think of it.

They lived in the same apartment, but for some reason she couldn't think of his name.[12]

"Ah, whatever."

Clara gave up thinking altogether about who the overall-clad guy was and started thinking about her battle plan.

What should she do to put Layfon to sleep?

That was where the problem lied.

There were two kinds of ways.

Take Layfon away from here alone, then make him drink the sleeping drug.

Or put everyone else to sleep, and then bring him back to her place.

If she did the former, she would have to take him away from here..... At the least, she would have to leave this room first.

If she did the latter, she would have to put everyone to sleep, which would make it hard to keep others from getting suspicious.

No one could help her. She tried thinking about who could help as she thought about how best to knock Layfon out (pharmaceutically).

"Um..... But..... What should I do?"

She still hadn't thought of a way.

Since she couldn't think of a way to take Layfon away from here alone, she should think about how to put everyone to sleep in an instant. That was more appropriate.

However, that wasn't easy to do.

Clara walked towards the place the fourteenth platoon was gathered as she thought about this matter. She couldn't think of any good way at all.

"Will this work?"

Just as Clara was wondering how to solve this difficult puzzle, she noticed it.

It seemed that the gods of fortune hadn't forsaken Clara.

It was a small machine placed in a corner of the room.

An air purifier.

Had it been taken out because there were many people coming? Or had it always been there? Clara walked over to check, and saw a run light blinking as it continuously discharged air.

It also had humidification functions.

When she saw the flashing light signaling a lack of water, Clara realized that the gods of fortune were seriously supporting her.

"Meishen-san."

"What is it?"

Clara called out to Meishen who was passing by. She looked over, holding new food.

Clara reflexively wove words while feeling somewhat guilty that she was still making food.

But her tone was very calm and not impatient.

"There's no water left, should I add some?"

Completely like she was trying to carry out an act of goodwill she had just thought up.

"Ah, that would be a great help."

"No problem."

After responding, Clara took out the water container and walked to the sink.

She added the water in a place no one could see.

Of course, she didn't forget to add a drop of the drug to the water.

"I forgot something in my room, so I'll go back and get it."

After saying that, Clara waited outside for an entire hour, then returned.

"....."

She covered her mouth, carefully easing the door open.

The room was extremely quiet, though it was unsure whether the drug had been effective.

Not knowing what the situation was, Clara crept into the room.

Everyone in the living room was lying on the ground as if they had collapsed.

"!"

Though this was for own benefit, Claribel felt as if her heartbeat had stopped. Meishen's journalist friend was the closest to her. After putting her hand near her mouth to check that she was breathing, Clara let out a relieved breath.

But she still couldn't be careless. Clara held her breath and approached the air filter, rapidly taking out its water container.

After checking that the kitchen exhaust fan was still running, Clara finally felt like it was time to move on.

"And now....."

She muttered, still covering her mouth with her hand.

The next step.

The feeling of her heart beating painfully hard made Clara dizzy. She found Layfon, ready to pick him up.

She prepared to pick him up.

She reached her arms out to pick him up.

Those arms stopped.

Clara noticed.

She noticed that a gaze was staring at her.

"....."

"....."

Her face felt paralyzed. This was the sensation of being stared at by someone. Clara slowly looked over.

Meishen was there, and her other friend was also there, along with one other person.

That person looked at Clara.

Vati Len looked at Clara.

"....."

"....."

She was lying down next to Meishen, her face pointed this way.

Her eyes were wide open.

In that instant, Clara's thoughts stopped.

◇

The mental conference erupted in a noisy commotion again.

"Why doesn't the drug work on that person!"

Clara H cried angrily.

"Come to think of it, she's supposedly not human, right?"

"Ah....."

"Now that you mention it--"

"Indeed."

After Clara H calmly said that, everyone instantly realized.

"Come to think of it, she's really scary."

"She doesn't blink either."

"She doesn't breathe, is she really alive?"

"Honestly, does she even need to breathe?"

"Selina-senpai said this was effective on filth monsters, right?"

"Maybe it's not effective because it was diluted?"

"Then what is she doing?"

"Hmm!"

After Clara C murmured this, everyone made pondering noises.

The person named Vati Len was clearly not a normal girl. Nina was the only one in Zuellni other than Clara who knew that she was the enemy of the world, and the difference between the powers of the two sides was overwhelmingly large.

The moment she told her secret to someone else, Zuellni would be destroyed.

She had announced this, and Clara understood that such a thing was possible with her power.

So Clara had always been very careful not to bother Vati.

So Nina and Clara could only resign themselves to observing what Vati did.

Fortunately, she hadn't brought forth any visible destruction. But they couldn't assert that nothing had happened just because they couldn't see anything.

So the two of them could only agonize every single day.

That Vati was looking at Clara.

To think she had focused her mind to other matters and forgotten about the existence of Vati.....

"What a grave misstep."

Their carelessness made Clara A sigh.

"No, there's still hope!"

It was Clara H who proclaimed this.

"Why do you think so?"

"Because she hasn't done anything until now."

Clara H stated.

"Though she hasn't done anything visible, who knows about what we haven't seen. But that just means that she at least doesn't want to do anything to cause any direct destruction. Isn't that how things are?"

"Well, probably."

Maybe.

Maybe not.

She was this fretful because things were unclear.

"Yeah, it's really nerve-wracking."

Clara H nodded strongly.

"But it's only because it's nerve-wracking that we were worried and unable to move for so long. Isn't this foolish?"

"Ohh!"

Why?

Why could Clara H make such a strong, powerful declaration?

After Clara H said this, Clara A and the other mental Claras wearing confused looks slowly regained their reason.

Clara H had that much strength.

How inexplicable.

What exactly was the character trait that Clara H possessed?

As she thought about such things, Clara A asked:

"Then what do we do now?"

"Need I say it!?"

As expected, Clara H was at no loss.

"Of course, we continue the plan!"

With her attitude, it wasn't hard to imagine Clara H saying something like that.

But it certainly brought courage to others when she proclaimed this with an unshakeable attitude.

"I believe that she won't move. She probably fell to the ground like everyone and pretended to sleep in order to show that she wouldn't move!"

"Ohh~....."

Clara H's valiant figure as she raised a fist high made the mental Claras ecstatic.

"Come, right now is when we achieve our goals!"

Clara H's declaration united the wills of the mental Claras.

◇

Click!

Clara made her decision without making a sound, but after a shout from inside her heart instead.

Vati was awake. She was clearly pretending to sleep, gazing over from behind the eyelids that she had closed.

Even if she realized that, she couldn't stop at this point.

"I've come this far!"

Clara reaffirmed her determination with a hushed voice as she put Layfon on her back, then surreptitiously left the room.

She couldn't look down upon a Military Artist's self-defense instinct even if they were drugged. The body could feel that it was in a crisis and then detoxify itself..... Such a thing might happen with a Military Artist's body.

Vati seemed not to be pursuing.

Clara moved her attention from behind her to Layfon's body as she stealthily moved to her room.

Clara anxiously drew out the key to open the door to her room. The key had to get stuck in her pocket at this time. Clara pulled the key out forcefully, opening a tear in the cloth.

The unusual sound of the ripping cloth increased her sense of anxiety, making her brain almost boil.

"!!!"

She couldn't make a sound, even to curse. Clara expelled her irritated feelings from her mind.

In reality, she acted extremely calmly.

After opening the door, she headed directly to the bedroom, placing Layfon lightly on the bed.

The scene of Layfon sleeping on her bed made Clara's head spin, and she almost lost consciousness there, but she forced herself to get a grip.

In any case, she first closed the open door, then locked it and put up the chain..... Then, Clara finally returned to her bedroom with a sense of accomplishment.

".....He hasn't woken up, right?'

She sneakily peeked into the bedroom.

The sound of Layfon's calm breathing reached her ears.

He was still sleeping. Claribel let out a relieved breath, then muttered.

"Then....."

◇

"Next is the rematch!"

Clara H was very excited.

The other mental Claras were also infected by her excitement.

But for some reason, Clara A was very calm at this moment.

Why was that?

The moment she saw the sleeping Layfon, she had a kind of 'huh?' feeling.

"It seems like something's wrong?"

That murmur didn't reach the ears of her compatriots. It just resounded in Clara A's ears, lingering in her chest like a suspicion exclusive to Clara A.

Could she ignore that doubt? Clara A felt anxious.

She had to do something.

What Clara A represented was that kind of straightforward mission.

Even if no one agreed, she had to think of some way to deal with that doubt.

"What am I concerned about?"

She had become like this after seeing Layfon, so the reason was definitely with him.

But in the current kind of situation, the opinions of the mental Claras were probably united.

No.....

A united opinion - that phrase was inaccurate. The mental Claras were the manifestations of Claribel's countless personality traits. Though their origins were similar, they couldn't fully form a unanimous opinion.

In the end, they used majority vote like the real world did.

Majority vote - meaning there were also people who cast opposing votes.

Clara A was one of the first to be influenced by Clara H and become a supporter, so she had completely forgotten about that.

"It couldn't be....."

After thinking of that, Clara A looked around.

The mental Claras were almost all gathered by the screen, but as she looked around, there were also scattered ones who weren't doing that.

Clara A approached one of them.

"What's wrong?"

Surprised, Clara G looked at the approaching Clara A.

"Do you oppose this?"

Clara A asked frankly.

"Rather than opposing it, it's more like I dislike it."

Clara G also replied frankly.

"Dislike it?"

"You don't know?"

Clara A was speechless for a moment when she was asked this.

Had she missed something?

"Do you know what we came here to do?"

"......Huh?"

This.....

Clara G's words made Clara A think of something.

She unconsciously looked back.

The mental Claras were crowded in front of the screen watching the original slowly shortening the distance between her and Layfon as they raised fists and prayed to the gods of fortune.

Incidentally, their thumbs were between their index and middle fingers.

For some reason, Clara A's eyes looked towards Clara H.

Why was she here?

Any mental Clara would be able to think of that answer with a bit of thinking.

But Clara H had proclaimed such a thing.

Of course, Claribel had that sort of desire. It was because she had that kind of desire that supporters among the mental Claras were gathered over there.

Even Clara A had once been a member of that group.

But something was wrong.

"Hmm?"

She was able to realize the key because she had once been a supporter and had then left the group.

Clara A narrowed her eyes and looked at Clara H's back.

".....Ah."

She saw something that ought not to exist.

".....A zipper?"

There was a zipper on Clara H's back.

She could understand if it were on her clothes, as the zipper could be explained as being part of the clothing.

But that zipper was on the back of her head.

"....."

Clara A silently and stealthily approached Clara H's back. Clara H and the others were focused on watching the screen and didn't notice Clara A approaching.

Clara A silently reached a hand to Clara H's zipper.

She pulled it down in a flash.

The Clara figure that was the same as everyone else's instantly parted in two and dropped softly to the ground.

Then, what showed up there was.....

"Ah, Sensei!"

After Clara A called out, Clara H - no, her teacher Troyatte - turned his head around.

"Why!?"

Why was Troyatte here?

But after she cried out, Clara A immediately realized the reason.

"Ah, you're the part of the personality that was influenced too much by Sensei."

After becoming his disciple, Claribel had immediately looked forward to Troyatte's way of life, but her teacher's countless womanizing actions had made Claribel hold him at arm's length and immediately disdain him.

So Clara A recognized that the mental Claras who responsibly looked up to her teacher's personality had already become extinct.

"I didn't think you would still be hanging on to life here!"

To think she had managed to hold on to life and had wielded influence in such an important juncture.

"Ahahahahahahaha! Since I've been revealed, there's no helping it!"

Troyatte laughed as he leaped away.

"To think we would be manipulated by that thing!"

"Drive him away! Hurry up and drive him away!"

"Stop!"

"Ahahahahahahahaha!"

After noticing that they had been instigated, the mental Claras chased after him with killing intent. Troyatte fled, and the difference in strength between master and pupil preordained in the mental Claras made it so that they were unable to capture Troyatte.

"I won't disappear! I won't disappearrrrrrrrr!"

"Disappearrrrrrrrr!"

Troyatte roared in a dramatic tone, and the mental Claras banded together to respond. This was the strength of influence between master and pupil. Whether good or bad, it seemed that they had to resign themselves to his actions.

Maybe because she had seen through his true identity, Clara A was free of her teacher's influence and stayed in front of the screen alone.

"....."

She alone looked at the screen.

The image on the screen was comprised of her hands, along with the ceiling visible through the gaps between her fingers.[13]

To Be Continued at the Battlefield

She came here in a flash.

She was surprised with a bang.

It came to her hands with a crash.

Then she became a Heaven's Blade successor.

The end.

"Uh, that exactly is going on?"

Clara griped in the already-empty room.

As the situation worsened, her thoughts could no longer keep up with developments.

After sensing an abnormal presence and rushing out of the room, she had met up with Nina and then they had been thrown into a mysterious, enigmatic space, and she had been separated from Nina as well.

Before she realized it, she had already arrived at Grendan's Royal Palace, and she had received a Heaven's Blade from the Queen's hands, officially becoming a member of the Heaven's Blade successors.

Moreover, she had unexpectedly inherited the name Noiran from her grandfather. It was like the royal family to keep to themselves, and it didn't feel at all like a joke.

".....Though I feel like nothing good's coming from this."

In the end, an irritating atmosphere was already gathering outside and she didn't have the leisure to worry about those little things anymore.

The true identity of the abnormal presence Clara felt was probably 'her'.

"Meaning....."

A figure of a certain person emerged in Clara's mind as she thought this.

"Does that mean she's finally moved?"

Clara didn't really understand what power had brought her here.

"No, that's probably what they call 'En'."

She was referring to the information sharing space of the Electronic Fairies.

Though the Wolf Faces had disappeared recently, Clara had learned of the existence of En when she fought against them.

She hadn't actually experienced the space, so she could only speculate..... But perhaps it was En.

Clara hadn't thought that she would experience that space at this time.

"There's no time to enjoy it."

Clara murmured with a bitter face.

She slowly regained calm from her chaotic mood.

She had returned to Grendan.

She was holding a Heaven's Blade in her hand.

Clara..... Claribel Ronsmier, had officially become a Heaven's Blade successor under the identity Claribel Noiran Ronsmier.

Perhaps it was a coincidence that she had the same Heaven's Blade as her grandfather. The Queen couldn't hold any kind of expectations of Clara, and Clara didn't believe that the Queen wouldn't give up the opportunity to give the Heaven's Blade Ronsmier to someone just for this kind of romantic gesture.

No matter what the process had been, she had obtained the Heaven's Blade here right now through her own strength.

".....If possible, I'd like some more reliable evidence."

She felt like she would be able to accept this outcome more easily if there were some sort of rigorous test like that.

Clara sighed.

Right now wasn't a situation where she could do such things.

Perhaps that was how things were.

"Then it's about time to get a grip."

Clara slapped her cheeks, completely stopping her whirling feelings.

"After all, I probably won't be able to think about useless things in the coming situation."

She tightly grasped the unrestored Heaven's Blade, hardening her mood and expression.

Grendan's long night was about to begin.

◇

After the Psychokinesis flake indicated the location to gather, Clara moved there.

The voice that came flake wasn't Delbone's mature voice, which made her feel a pang of loneliness.

However, right now wasn't the time to worry about such things. The Psychokinesist who succeeded her was definitely very outstanding - Clara thought this as she advanced there.

She bumped into that person on the way.

"Yo!"

".....Uwah!"

It was Troyatte.

"What's up with that attitude?"

"No, it feels like it's been a long time~ But I'm not feeling any respect at all."

"Huh?"

"You could even say it feels very annoying."

"I'm more surprised that there was still the possibility of being respect at this point in time."

"Huuh!?"

"You're pretty courteous."

"I never thought I'd be praised like that!"

"Hahahaha."

It had been a long time since they met, but she didn't sense that atmosphere from him at all.

Troyatte's attitude was really bad.

"Um....."

"What's wrong?"

"Sensei, are you not surprised?"

"Why?"

"Uh, I left the city, but suddenly appeared here."

Right.

She could probably explain the situation better if he had been surprised at this and said something like 'why are you here?'.

No, she couldn't properly explain the way she had moved anyways.

"Well, whatever."

But Troyatte had this kind of attitude.

It felt a bit - bothersome.

"......Sensei, why do you think I'm here?"

"Hmm, I remember you left the city, right?"

"Yes."

"Maybe you didn't actually do that."

"Yes..... Huuh?"

Clara almost inadvertently nodded agreement.

"......Sensei, why do you think that?"

"There are two possibilities."

"Hah?"

"You've been carrying out some mission under the Queen's secret orders the whole time."

"Ah, it feels like you said something very normal, Sensei!"

"The second possibility is that you've been hiding in your closet doing Sakkei training the whole time."

"Ah, you're still normal, just as I thought."

"So, which one was it?"

"Neither of them."

"Whaat, how boring. Then whatever."

"Uwah, what kind of reaction is that?"

"It's enough that you're here right now."

"Huh?"

"It's great to see you look so spirited."

"......Sensei."

Clara was a bit moved.

"Sensei, I....."

"Hmm~?"

"I received a Heaven's Blade!"

Clara was moved upon learning that her teacher believed in her as a disciple.

Has this disciple grown? Yes, probably. Clara had received a Heaven's Blade, so she felt that it would be fine to assert this.

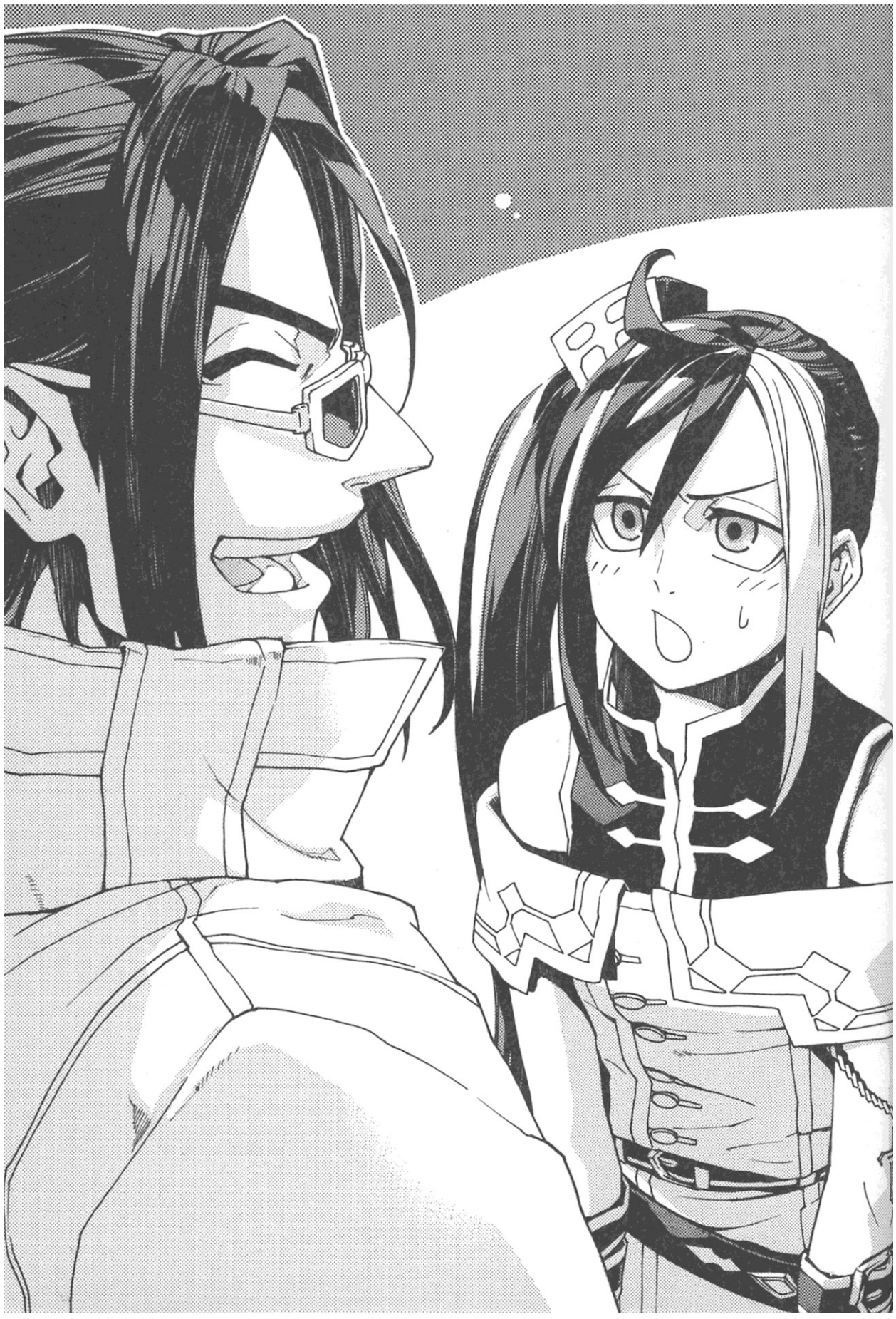
She excitedly took out the Heaven's Blade to show Troyatte.

"Really."

But Troyatte's reaction was very boring.

"Huh?"

"Uh, that's fine either way~"



"Huuh!?"

"It doesn't matter whether my disciple’s grown or not, with the situation how it is."

"Why is that? Didn't you just say it was great to see me so spirited?"

"Hmm, you are very spirited, right?"

"Yeah!"

"If you're very spirited, then something like strength doesn't matter, right?"

"Wh.....Why!?"

"Because I protect all women!"

"Guah!"

In other words, women didn't need to fight.

Troyatte seemed to want to express that idea.

"But never mind that for now, my disciple. When you were in the Academy City, did you find any good matches for your Sensei?"

"How would I do that kind of thing!?"

As the two of them quibbled, Heaven's Blade successors arrived one after the other.

The sight of the always-frowning Ruimei and Barmelin walking here together was a bit funny, but Clara held it in.

She wanted to keep her life.

Because of her comedic talk with Troyatte, Clara didn't even have to explain that she had become a Heaven's Blade successor to Kanaris, who arrived last. In that sense, maybe Clara had gotten lucky.

But she was also thus unable to greet the person who had newly become a Heaven's Blade successor.

"Sensei, who's that?'

"Hmm? Ah, a newcomer."

"Uh, I know that..... Ah, no, whatever."

"Hmm?"

"Sensei has no reason to be interested in men."

"That's right."

The definite answer, with no hesitation, even made her feel dizzy.

That person's name seemed to be Haia Wolfstein Laia.

He had inherited the name Wolfstein.

That should have been Layfon's.

Though Clara had that thought, Layfon wasn't here after all.

It seemed that he, who was of a similar age to Clara, had once been in charge of a mercenary gang. From that, it could be seen that this person was skilled at cooperation, which was important for the Heaven's Blade successors.

As Clara thought, that proposal was rejected.[14]

One could realize just by seeing Troyatte that these people were either uninterested in others or had extreme biases in their perceptions of others. They were almost incompatible with the word 'cooperation'.

If nothing happened, it was impossible for them to cooperate.

But Clara realized that such a huge event was happening now.

Maybe she should mention that.

Maybe..... But right now there was no time to do that.

Because she had come.

"Vati....."

As expected, the figure advancing through the hallway was Vati Len herself.

She wasn't hallucinating.

Nor was it someone who looked familiar. It was the Vati Len that Clara knew.

Just like how Clara had been somehow transported to Grendan, had Vati had also used some special method of movement?

When that kind of trivial question flashed through her mind, the battle began.

Was this just as expected? Vati was quite powerful.

She easily avoided Haia as he preemptively charge, and even dodged Ruimei's attack when it was halfway out.

Explosive Kei was released from Ruimei's entire body.

"You're rambling me to death."

Even his tone gave off sparks.

"It should be enough to destroy her completely, right?"

"Although you're right, it's probably better not to care too much about order right now."

Troyatte, who said that, shot out flame as he attacked.

"Are you qualified to say that?"

"I'm taking precautions because I'm afraid that you'll be too ashamed when you're defeated. It's only insurance."

"Ha!"

Troyatte still continued chatting after that, which made Clara start to worry.

Sensei wasn't still underestimating Vati's power, right?

But she had already struck down Cauntia, Reverse, and Kalvan before she came here.

That shouldn't be possible - she wanted to believe that, but.....

"Um..... I think it would be best not to be too careless."

"Of course, we're not being careless, former disciple."

"F.....Former?"

That name was unexpected.

"Since you're become a Heaven's Blade, then our relationship isn't master and disciple."

"I.....I see."

"So, of course we're not careless."

"Is that so?"

"No doubt."

"I'm really doubting."

"Haha. Well, there's no helping that."

She couldn't see Vati's figure. She couldn't have been crushed by Ruimei's iron ball, nor was it possible that she had been burned to a crisp by Troyatte's fire attack.

Even Clara realized that.

A sense of danger made her face tingle.

As long as that atmosphere didn't vanish, she couldn't drop her guard just because her enemy was unseen or didn't move.

However, why could Troyatte be so laid-back?

"We're not careless. The reason we look careless....."

After Troyatte said that, someone behind him moved.

It was Savaris.

He raised his arms, putting his hands in a position to snap his fingers.

Then, he snapped his fingers.

"It's because we know who’s going to continue the attack."

The sound of the snap overlapped with Troyatte's voice.

The sound of successive explosions also overlapped.

The ceiling exploded.

Then, Vati appeared, as if blasted out by the explosion.

"I'm slowly starting to understand."

Savaris spoke to the fallen[15] Vati.

Clara was speechless, seeing that scene.

She was even a bit dazed.

She hadn't noticed Savaris doing anything.

Though she had become a Heaven's Blade, that didn't mean the gaps in strength that had existed before becoming a Heaven's Blade had all vanished.

Could it be that because of her half-baked progress, gaps that she hadn't known about before were becoming clear?

"Uuu..... I can't lose!"

She couldn't fail here.

As Savaris and Vati spoke, Clara silently resolved herself again on the side.

Right.

Because she would always hold the desire to become strong.

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Soon after that, the battle turned into a cooperative assault commanded by Haia.

Though the Heaven's Blade successors were a group that advocated individuality, they could respond flexibly to battle situations.

After Clara honestly sincerely that, she was played with by the unexpected performance of the Heaven's Blade that surpassed her own performance as she desperately tried to keep up with the battle.

In this battle could be techniques and destructive power that definitely couldn't be realized by any ordinary Military Artist. Clara skillfully fought this battle, but right now a situation she had never imagined was happening.

No, it was unexpected that Vati would still be completely alright after being exposed to the Heaven's Blade successors' extraordinary destructive powers, but right now there was an even stranger situation happening.

Maybe she had anticipated this.

Anticipated that things would become like this.

It was Layfon.

Layfon had come here.

Clara couldn't even properly explain how she had come here, so how had Layfon come here?

Though she was interested, the atmosphere right now wasn't one where she could ask questions.

"Why is that guy here?"

Ruimei's displeased voice didn't change Layfon's expression.

"Since I'm here, I'm here. Please don't ask about something so obvious."

Layfon replied. She had never seen him replying to a question this pointedly in Zuellni.

But she had seen him do so often in Grendan.

To be honest, Clara was more used to this Layfon.

"A Military Artist who can't even draw out his power will only be a hindrance."

"If you think I'm a hindrance, then why don't you just not help me out? .....When did you become so caring?"

"Ha.....Hahahahahahahahaha! That's right, indeed."

Savaris let out a drawn-out laugh, and Layfon gazed at him suspiciously.

He had gotten along very naturally with the Heaven's Blade successors.

That's right.

After all, he was a former Heaven's Blade successor.

Other than the newcomers Clara, Haia, and Elsmau who was not present, Layfon and the other Heaven's Blades were rivals, and some had fought shoulder-to-shoulder before.

The sense of wrongness that Clara felt about being here..... He probably didn't have anything to do with such a feeling.

Even with a Heaven's Blade in her hand, Clara still felt restless about whether she ought to be here. He probably didn't feel anything like that.

Maybe it was just wishful thinking.

Maybe he also felt restless.

Maybe he also felt scared.

Maybe he also felt helpless and that he had come to the wrong place.

But if he did, his expression desperately hid those emotions, and he maintained his expression from when he had been a Heaven's Blade successor.

That made her envious.

It also made her jealous.

Why can't I even put on a calm expression?

That made her extremely unhappy.

Moreover, he wasn't even surprised at the fact that Clara was present, and just leaped into the battle with Vati.

It was hard to bear.

"Honestly!"

How many times do I have to experience this feeling?

Before she knew it, the tense feeling on the battlefield had already vanished from Clara's body, and replacing it was a feeling of impatience that tried to take over her heart.

She herself didn't know whether this was good or not.

Layfon was still fearlessly challenging Layfon, even without a Heaven's Blade in his hands. Clara was fighting as if chasing after his figure.

She only had Layfon in her eyes, and couldn't see anything else.

"Hey, wait!"

As expected, it was Troyatte who stopped her.

"You're too emotional, idiot."

"Let me go!"

After being grabbed by the neck and pulled back, Clara flung off Troyatte's hand and shouted angrily.

The battle situation had changed again. Perhaps she was affected by Layfon and Lintence's entrance. Vati had started moving underground, underground, searching for her original target - the girl called Saya.

Clara and the Heaven's Blade successors tried to stop her, but Vati had left a wriggling mass of thorns as a gift for them.

Layfon had leaped into those thorns, so Clara had also wanted to charge out.

He planned on passing through that wall of thorns to pursue Vati.

In that case, Clara had to go. When she was ready to chase after him without hesitation, Troyatte had stopped her.

"Why did you stop me!?"

"Do you think you can break through that thing?"

Clara was quite agitated, but Troyatte's look was very calm.

"Even I can do that!"

"How can you do that when you can't even find the right opportunity?"

"Ugh!"

Clara couldn't say anything in the face of her teacher's helpless tone.

"But....."

Clara looked over.

Layfon's figure had already vanished on the other side of the wriggling mass of thorns. He and Lintence, who had also charged inside, were probably safe and sound.

Now that Psychokinesis was being disturbed, no one knew any details.

But the possibility that Layfon died didn't exist in Clara's heart.

He had definitely reached underground together with Lintence and was fighting with Vati right now.

Clara couldn't wait over here.

"But....."

She really wanted to go.

Was her mind unable to keep up with the rapidly-changing situation because she was thinking too much?

"It hurts....."

A headache and dizziness made Clara press on her temple.

"I....."

Want to catch up.

Want to stand by his side.

Yeah, she thought of it.

Thought of the events that night.

The final happy night in Zuellni.

◇

That night she had been lost and confused.

Clara covered her face with her hands, staring at the ceiling.

"No no no no."

The empty feeling after the celebration, mixed with the factor of the drug, had led Clara astray.

She had a confused feeling.

"It's not this, I didn't want to do something like this. I didn't come to Zuellni to do something like this."

Layfon was still sleeping on the bed. Exactly how strong was this drug's effect? He didn't seem to show any signs of waking up.

This was the only way she could be redeemed right now.

"U, uuuu....."

But exactly how meaningful was that kind of redemption?

Maybe she could just wake Layfon up and shout at him. That might feel better.

"It wasn't for something like that!"

Layfon didn't wake up even if she shouted.

Clara put her head against his chest.

".....I really want to win against you."

She finally said those words.

"I really want to win against you."

It didn't matter if this was a celebration or what.

She wanted to fight an epic battle against Layfon and then win.

She desired to prove her existence to Layfon in the strongest way possible.

Was that love?

Or respect for someone strong?

She didn't know herself.

But whether it was love or respect, she didn't believe doing this could eliminate those feelings.

Just that wouldn't be enough.

This kind of thing couldn't satisfy her.

I'm different from Troyatte.

Troyatte had once said this.

That women were redemption for Troyatte, as long as they were women.

The problem of who they were or what kind of personality they had didn't matter. As long as women were women and acted their gender, Troyatte would be redeemed.

Honestly, Claribel didn't really understand what that meant.

Maybe it was just Troyatte covering up his womanizing games. She felt that was very likely.

But Clara couldn't forget Troyatte's sincere look when he had said that.

Even if the people around him didn't approve, maybe his reasons were still sincere.

Clara - Claribel was different from Troyatte.

Male-female relationships wouldn't redeem her.

Though she still hadn't experienced any of that, it probably wouldn't redeem her..... She thought.

She didn't have any clear self-confidence.

But right now, at this point in time, Clara wouldn't be redeemed by such things.

She really wanted to win.

Her current self could only confess the remorse in her heart on Layfon's chest.

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"Though I don't know the reasons."

Clara was at a loss for words due to her excited emotions, but Troyatte's look was still very calm.

"......No, actually I'm eighty percent sure I know the reason, but I can guess the feelings of my former disciple, so I'll deliberately pretend not to know."

"....."

"So, even though I don't know the reasons."

"......Who was that supplemental explanation for? Was it even necessary?"

"Well, I guess not."

"Honestly....."

"Eighty was just a number I said out of politeness. It's actually one hundred."

"That doesn't matter!"

"No, it matters."

"Why?"

"This isn't a problem of how much the teacher understands the disciple."

"No?"

"This is related to the ultimate problem of how much I understand women."

"......Aah, honestly!"

His attitude of ignoring her worries made her mad.

"That's how things are, my disciple. Because if you have no chance with him, there's no meaning in chasing bashfully after him."

"I..... I said that wasn't it....."

"In any case, it's a fact that you have no chance with him, right?"

"......Ugh!"

"It's not like my disciple to rush out bashfully like an idiot."

"......You said I was your former disciple before."

"No matter whether former or not, a disciple is a disciple. If you do this, my tutelage will have been for nothing."

"Ugh....."

"Didn't I say? The essential technique for Karen Kei is a calm judgment ability. Didn't I say to take a step back and then take action?"

"That....."

You don't even know what you want to do, so what can you accomplish?"

"I....."

"Well, that's how things are. If you can't see any chance of victory, it's time to hide. Just quietly stay here and do some odd jobs."

"Uuu....."

It didn't matter at all whether she was a former disciple or a Heaven's Blade successor like him.....

"I feel like I'm being treated like a low-ranking soldier."

"There's no helping it, you actually are a low-ranking soldier."

"Uuu....."

So stay here and fight like a low-ranking soldier, this place is also very busy."

Actually, they would have to spend quite a bit of effort to defeat these thorns.

Ruimei had fallen.

Kanaris had disappeared.

Savaris had also fallen.

And speaking broadly, the current battle situation was just the beginning.

After all, Clara and the others hadn't been able to meet up with the Queen and the others yet.

A new enemy would appear after they defeated the thorns, and hence Clara and the others were forced to stay here.

Also, their combat power had been reduced sharply because they had lost three Heaven's Blade successors.

Though they had faced an extreme crisis, a mysteriously powered-up Nina had suddenly appeared, so they had managed to overcome the difficulty.

As everyone was doing this, the underground battle ended.

However, even that outcome wasn't the final ending.

The sky changed color and a huge ball of flame descended.

It cast a wrathful air over the entire world as it transformed into the figure of a giant beast.

This beast was definitely the final event.

Its huge anger that could even change the color of the world almost engulfed Clara.

However, Troyatte next to her wasn't engulfed.

"So that cute little girl died?"

The gray matter in Troyatte's brain that had been a bit addled due to using too many huge techniques now finally calmed down.

His heavy tone lacked vitality.

"What a pity."

The cute little girl he referred to in this situation was Vati.

"......I don't think she was a human."

Clara had seen Vati pretending to be a student in Zuellni, but she didn't sympathize with her.

Since the moment she had encountered her, Clara had realized Vati was a crisis of the world. That recognition created a mental burden for her, and she had always been fighting with that burden.

Now, the relaxed feeling of finally being released from that pressure was rather strong.

"She wanted to become human."

"Hah?"

Clara didn't understand what Troyatte wanted to express.

"The expression she made was an expression of really really wanting to become a woman."

"In that case, if would be fine if Sensei turned her into a woman."

'What are you saying?' - Clara shot back at him with that thought in mind.

"I wanted to, but it didn't work out."

Troyatte asserted with an extremely serious expression.

"It's complicated since not just anyone will do."

"....."

What had this person seen in Vati Len?

Clara had originally taken this remark as a joke, but she suddenly became interested in it.

"Sensei, don't just make that kind of shot-in-the-dark opinion, okay?"

"It's a judgment made from my experience, so calling it a shot in the dark is going too far. Well, but I can't completely deny it."

".....Why do you think that, Sensei?"

"Everyone wants to be somewhere they want to be."

"That....."

"That girl looked like she had nowhere to stay."

".....She wasn't a human, so who knows."

Clara turned her back to Troyatte, unwilling to look at that pair of eyes gazing into the distance.

Somewhere she wanted to be.

Today had been hectic, but it was a day that had made her think deeply about many things.

Clara wanted a day to happen where she was so busy that she didn't have time to think before it was over.

It would end calmly and uneventfully, then she would sink into her bed with a 'ah, I'm so tired'.

But that was no good.

.....Maybe it was no good.

Somewhere she wanted to be.

If they lost this battle, and the world truly disappeared because of it, then what would Clara have been protecting so desperately?

She was indifferent about just protecting her own life - Clara thought this, but she felt that would be a bit lonely.

Clara didn't think that she could use the Heaven's Blade tightly gripped in her hand however she wanted. She had always been just assisting Troyatte and the other Heaven's Blade successors.

Maybe that was enough.

She had carried out a battle suited to her own strength, and maybe that was enough.

Also, maybe everything could go smoothly if everyone just did what was within their ability.

That ought to work.

But would that be enough? A certain emotion asked this of her.

She heard it then.

She heard that speech.

"However, if you still think that you have to stand tall!"

"Huh?"

The voice that suddenly sounded out made Clara's eyes widen.

(The surroundings have changed.)

"Hah?"

(Cities..... have appeared around our city.)

Elsmau's voice seemed to carry confusion.

Also, that was certainly a hard-to-believe report.

"Huh? Huh?"

"As expected of a final battle, anything can happen."

Troyatte smiled wryly, but the situation was nothing to look down at.

Outside the city, huge objects appeared one after another as far as the eye could see.

Cities appeared from empty space.

Exactly what kind of miracle had occurred for things to become like this?

"I don't understand."

Her mind couldn't keep up with the situation, and Claribel didn't know what to do.

"Ohh, he's doing something incredible~"

In complete contrast to Claribel, Haia looked very happy.

"Do you know something?"

"You mean about what's happening right now? How could I know~"

"But you just....."

"I know who's talking."

"You know who's talking?"

The speech still continued.

That person was talking about whether to fight or not.

About protecting their own lives, about protecting their own homes.

To fight or not to fight.

"It's the Student Council President of Zuellni of last year!"

"Huhh?"

Come to think of it, it seemed like his voice. She had only seen him once to talk about conditions after she left home, so was that why she had forgotten his voice?

No, the biggest reason was that she hadn't even thought that someone she knew would be doing such a thing on this occasion.

Even if she didn't remember his voice, the rest of the speech still crept into Clara's heart.

The voice of people excited to do battle seemed to reach her ears.

"Is Zuellni there too?"

(Yes.)

Elsmau replied very quickly.

"Really?"

Zuellni's here too, huh.

Clara hadn't even been there for a year. However, her heart already held emotions similar to nostalgia.

"Fight, people of the moving cities!"

"Ah? Are you going?"

"You knew?"

"Well, enjoy your youth."

"Yeah--"

Though it was lazy encouragement, it was very much like Troyatte's style.

Clara also charged out as if to chase after Layfon's back.

She wanted to chase after his back.

She had been that way until now, and she would be the same in the future.

Until the day came when she surpassed him.

"This is a lot better than waiting for the end of the world."

After cheerfully murmuring this, Clara leaped towards Zuellni.

Translation Notes and References

1. Jump up ↑ Demonic beings from Hindu and Buddhist mythology.

2. Jump up ↑ This whole fourteenth-platoon thing is a joke off of something made up in the Regios manga. I urge you to read that manga because it's hilarious.
3. Jump up ↑ Sound effect of a beating heart. Apparently, she likes their costumes.
4. Jump up ↑ Explanation: Felli chooses the outfits for the Three Jet-Black Stars in the manga. She chooses normal clothes, though, so what they're wearing is apparently not exactly what she picked out for them.
5. Jump up ↑ Rough translation
6. Jump up ↑ Reference to a terrible nickname Felli made for Layfon way back from Volume 2.
7. Jump up ↑ I couldn't think of an appropriate term. This phrase is supposed to represent someone who makes suggestive/perverse comments towards women, but who doesn't actually have the guts to do anything more.
8. Jump up ↑ About mooching off of Layfon.
9. Jump up ↑ See Volume 23 Storm Bringer.
10. Jump up ↑ This is actually in the text.
11. Jump up ↑ This is a gesture symbolizing sex.
12. Jump up ↑ Poor Harley.
13. Jump up ↑ I assume that Claribel is facepalming with her head back and ends up stopping what she was going to do.
14. Jump up ↑ In the main story, Haia proposes that the Heaven’s Blades cooperate, and gets shot down.
15. Jump up ↑ She fell from the ceiling.